SIREN SONG

A MAN HUNTING HIS GIRLFRIEND'S MURDERER
A SOUL TRAPPED IN HELL
AND A DETECTIVE TRYING TO FIND THEM ALL

A DIFFERENT SCANDINAVIAN CRIME NOVEL

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Siren Song

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Published November 2014
Amazon Kindle Edition

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Siren Song

Erik Boman

Prelude

Stockholm, western suburbs

January

Friday evening

First John hears the scream.

He is standing next to his car, plastic shopping bags in one hand, car keys in the other. Snowflakes melt on his cheeks while he frowns at Molly's window, three storeys up in the block of flats. He knows it was Molly who screamed; her voice was muted and distant, but it touched him on a level no other sound could.

Then he hears the bang.

A small crack of thunder from inside her flat. Her two windows flash white, shudder, and grow still.

John runs towards the front door. The air is already cold enough to freeze spit in minutes, but a worse chill reaches inside his clothes and in under his skin. People around him stop and stare as he skids on the ice-coated pavement. He ignores them. All that matters is reaching the flat to make sure he is wrong.

A shout, a bang, and a burst of light. It could be an accident, a TV, maybe fireworks. Never a gun. That was impossible. Not here, at this time.

Friday, afternoon, almost dark: The mundane tail end of a routine week. Snow on the windowsills, cars crawling along white roads, purple-blue sky. Trees covered in frost and icicles waiting to drop. Everything in order. Until now.

He is less than twenty metres from the door when it bangs open. A man stumbles out and runs in the other direction. Dark hair, dark shoes, blue track pants, a backpack in faded red. The man's rapid footsteps creak in the snow as he disappears around a corner. The door swings shut. John is still moving. Five metres left.

Panting hard, he reaches the door and struggles to control his shaking hands while he fumbles with his keys. He should let go of the shopping bags, but he holds on, as if their triviality is a lifeline, a ward against this brutal intrusion.

He gets the key in, turns it and shoves the door open. Stumbling, he runs up the stairs, past thick doormats and wet orange plastic sleds, past rows of boots and pots of wilted flowers. By the time he reaches the third floor, he is wheezing. A cramp stabs at his left side.

Molly's front door is wide open. Two more steps and he is inside, shouting her name. He turns to the bedroom and stops.

Molly lies on her back across the bed. Her head hangs off the mattress, but while she is facing him, she is not looking at him or something behind him; her eyes are flat like porcelain and perfectly still. Blood runs freely from Molly's ruined neck; visions of creatures mauled by lions on hot savannahs come to John's mind quicker than he can push the images away. Red stains cover the far wall: part of Molly ripped away and stored as a grotesque snapshot of the moment of her death.

Minutes pass while John stands still and watches the blood spread out from the bedroom and into the hall. Silence fills him, muting cars and distant voices. His pulse is a remote drum in his head. With rapid and shallow breaths, he pulls the reek of gunpowder into his lungs.

Lying around him are the contents of his dropped shopping bags, bloodied and inert. A bottle of red wine *(same as last weekend and a bit expensive but she loves it)*, a box of organic milk chocolate *(breaking off uneven pieces and watching them disappear between her lips)*, his toothbrush *(hoping he will be able to leave it at her place again)*.

His eyes sweep around the apartment, drifting from detail to detail. A dress flung over a wardrobe door. Mismatched china on the table. Two wine glasses backlit by a candle and waiting to be filled. A slow drip from the tap in the kitchen. Her blue slippers outside the bathroom. Neon-lit dust swirling in the living room. The mahogany clock in the hall, ticking away seconds as blank as his thoughts.

He knows he should look at the body on the bed; the bedroom is an open coffin lid, and he must inscribe the sight on his mind.

And still, he cannot move. Denial ties him to the linoleum floor while the blood pools around his feet. His attention keeps sliding off the bed in

search of a crack, an opening back to normality, an escape to life ten minutes earlier.

Then he hears a new chorus of screams rising and falling, growing in strength. Sirens, coming closer. The sound cements the reality of the horror before him, and finally, he opens himself to the pain and recognition.

But it is too much.

The hurt is a wave, vast and smothering, and it overwhelms him, making him first buckle, then yield. The anguish that follows thins to a sliver and slices through him, guillotining denial from acceptance.

“Molly,” he whispers, and is torn apart.

*

Part of John stays behind, rooted to the floor.

A cold shoots through his mind as his pulse slows down. The throbbing in his ears gives way to a soft, subdued calm. When his focus is back under his control, he turns to the bed and meets Molly’s unmoving eyes. This time he does not blink. A single ambition rises from the core of his being and lodges itself in his mind. Alternatives and possibilities fall into place, cementing his route.

Careful not to touch the blood, John leans down and unties his shoes. The sirens outside grow sharper, more eager, but he does not rush. One action needs to follow another. One mistake will break his planned chain of events that stretches into the future all the way to the conclusion.

Once his shoelaces are untied, he steps out of his shoes, away from the blood, and into the small, white-tiled bathroom. He takes a green plastic bag from under the sink, opens one of the bathroom cabinets, and rakes the contents on the shelves into the bag: Molly’s razors and lotions, toothpaste, two old toothbrushes, deodorant, tweezers, nail cutters, perfumed tissue.

He goes to the bedroom and switches on the light. Again stepping over the blood, he opens the narrow, built-in wardrobe and takes out a black canvas bag. Inside are a towel and a thick yoga mat covered with stiff rubber spikes.

John shoves the half-filled green plastic bag into the larger black bag, followed by a woollen blanket, a scarf and a compact sleeping bag. He

unclips from his belt two rings, each the diameter of a finger and holding dozens of keys. He tucks the key rings deep into the bag.

The sirens are close when he walks into the kitchen. There is just enough space left in the bag for a two-litre plastic bottle that he fills from the tap. He turns to the fridge and opens it. A box of milk, a jar of green olives, salad, carrots and mustard, three jars of hummus, a large bowl of nuts. A steel bowl with soy steaks soaked in marinade. A near-empty bottle of vinegar. Enough food to last him a few days, but too cumbersome to carry.

He closes the fridge and looks out through the kitchen window. The sun has almost set. Past the curtain of snow are sidewalks lined with cars, most parked so close their bumpers almost touch each other. Most of the windows in the three-storey block of flats across the street are dark. Two children are building a snowman while their mother waits nearby, rocking her pram and stamping her feet to keep warm. Below the window, a man in a wheelchair negotiates the entrance of the corner shop. He looks at the shop's entrance and registers details that never before have mattered.

The sirens fill the air. Children turn and point down the street; the police are almost here. John sees blue flashing lights reflected in the windows. He hefts the bag and walks out of the kitchen, pausing in the doorway to take a set of knives from a rack next to the stove. He slips the knives into the bag, zips the bag shut, steps over the blood, and looks out through the open door into the stairwell.

From below come faint echoes of dropped cutlery and the mumble of news shows pierced by a loud coughing. A power box in the ceiling hums and clicks. The stairwell is dark; no one has pressed the timed light switch in the last five minutes.

He waits for his eyes to adapt to the gloom and then walks down the stairs. Wearing only socks on his feet, his footsteps are almost soundless as he pads down the cool steps, past voices in foreign languages whispering from behind closed doors. He reaches the front door, a thick pane of glass framed in pale wood, and peers out.

The police car accelerates down the street as fast as it can through the snow, its horn blasting as other cars struggle to swerve out of the way. Blue lights flood the street and brush the façades of the buildings. People stop and stare, mesmerised by the spectacle. No one is looking at John.

John opens the door, steps out into the whirling snow, and runs south. And begins.

*

John

But not all of John leaves through the door.

As his grief scythes through him, a shard of him escapes and falls away, back from the terror, while the world fades like a postcard sinking in tar.

John’s loss wraps itself around him like a web and drags him down faster, pulling him ever deeper, until the fall breaks all his thoughts apart.

Only one sensation remains: an unspeakable, bitter coldness.

Before long, he is only an ember floating down a chasm, the last light of the world lost far above. Oblivion winds itself tighter around him until, at last, he is entirely gone from this world, his soul swallowed by a horror he could not endure.

Or so he would have thought.

*

Lena

“It’s not much,” the officer says to Lena, “but it’s what we have so far. Do you want to hear it now or wait until I’ve sorted the notes? I’m afraid they’re a mess.”

Staring out the kitchen window at the crime scene, Lena Franke does not hear the junior officer’s question. She checks the small clock on the wall. Half past three. Fifty minutes since the first police car arrived on the scene. Outside, the slow sunset is bleeding into dark gray. Soon the sky will deepen into the black of winter nights.

Although she has been on the scene less than twenty minutes, it feels like hours. The deep bass from a nearby party rumbles in the building like a subterranean thunder. Tiredness makes her eyes water. She wants to lean against a kitchen wall, but the forensic team in the bedroom would tell her off; as far as they are concerned, the officers’ presence is bad enough. The sidewalk outside is closed off, but as usual, the blue-and-white plastic tape is a magnet to bystanders trying to look diffident while they hope for a fragment of drama.

A metallic clatter sounds from the bedroom, where the forensic team hovers over the body. In the kitchen, the stench of gunpowder is giving in to the fragrance of incense, spices and tea leaves. The room and its decorations look disconnected, unrelated to the dead woman in the adjacent room. Lena never gets used to the contrast. The cutlery and the teacups, the metal sieve, the bottle of soy sauce and the kitchen towels. All in suspense, ready to be used.

Half an hour ago, Lena had been in her car, cursing the snow along with thousands of other drivers while she was heading towards the city headquarters to wrap up the week. She had pictured a weekend of silence and serenity, hours in the calmness of the basement gym and uninterrupted lines of thought. Perhaps, if she was lucky, even some solid sleep. Then the reports of a shot had come over the radio.

Unthinking, she had flicked the siren on, cut through the traffic, and cursed her way to the suburb. Sleep had to wait. She was in the area and on duty. For some reason, this alert had jolted her badly; she had been looking

at the radio when it beeped. In hindsight, it was as if she had been expecting the call.

On her way, she called to make sure no trains stop at the nearby underground station, then roped in three local patrols to search for suspects. They need all the luck they can find; the western suburb is peppered with dark parks and alleys, and hundreds of people have passed the street below since the shot was fired. This search will be a nightmare. Her hope for a good lead rests with the forensic team and the patrols.

Lena glances at Agnes, who stands next to her with a thick notepad in her hands. She has known the younger woman just over two months. A fresh cadet, keen and analytic. Perfect superintendent material. Physically, they are almost diametrically opposite, as if they had been paired to balance each other. Agnes is slim and lithe, Lena a head taller and heavier. While Agnes keeps her blonde hair tied back, Lena's dark curls escape every attempt to keep them out of her face. Their faces mark the greatest difference: Agnes is pale and freckled, whereas Lena is darker, an echo from her distant Bulgarian lineage.

"Lena?" Agnes asks. "The notes? Like I said, they're not in order, but we can go over them now if you want."

"Right." Lena blinks, stifles a sigh, and straightens up. "Whenever you're ready."

Agnes leafs through the papers. "The flat owner's driver's license matches the victim," she says, "so for now, the forensics believe that the victim is the owner of the flat. They'll know for certain soon."

"Go on," Lena says.

"The victim's name is Molly Marianne Berglund. Maiden name Linden, born in Uppsala in 1978. She moved to Stockholm seventeen years ago, both parents deceased. Unmarried, no siblings or children. She worked at Brunnen Natural Health. She has no criminal record, no debts, no signs of abuse or illegal activities. That I've seen, I mean," she adds.

"I see." Lena uses her empty polystyrene coffee cup to cover a yawn. "What else?"

"Bad night's sleep again?" Agnes asks.

"I'm fine." Lena stops herself from wincing. "And I want to hear the rest. All of it. Have the forensics come up with a statement yet?" she asks. "It's obvious what killed her, but I need details."

She knows why Agnes is uncomfortable; they should not be here yet, in the way of the forensics, but Lena wants to form an idea of what happened. For that she needs context. She has to see the backdrop. Agnes would never protest, but she cannot help fidgeting.

Lena is pleased to see a chink in Agnes's armour of efficiency, but the joy is quickly weighed down by guilt. *You're a senior officer,* Lena tells herself. *Act like one.*

The younger officer shifts her papers. "A single gunshot to the jugular," she reads. "They're still trying to get the bullet out of the wall. They think it's heavy calibre. It hit the arterial vein on the right side of the victim's neck, ricocheted off a bedpost, and struck her bedside clock."

"It bounced off a bedpost?" Lena asks.

"The bed's made of cast iron." Agnes pauses. "What do you make of the shoes?" she asks. "His feet must be frozen solid by now."

Lena glances at the black shoes in the middle of the small hall. Men's size, neatly aligned, surrounded by blood. Neatly arranged in the mess, they stand out as if they were signposted.

"He must've been afraid he'd leave tracks in the snow." She nods at the window and the streets below. "A panicked, stupid idea, and one that could help us; being shoeless in this weather might draw attention and make him easier to track. He's given us plenty of DNA samples, too."

She turns back to Agnes. "I want the coroner's full report as soon as it's ready. Not that it'll change much at this point." She pauses. "What's your own preliminary?"

The younger officer pauses and clears her throat. "Jealousy," she says. "Her boyfriend caught her in bed with someone else and snapped. Maybe the shot was meant for the other man. Or woman. As far as we can tell, only one shot was fired, but there might have been a fight."

"Maybe," Lena agrees.

When Lena arrived at the flat, she took a long look at the body before escaping to the kitchen. Now she thinks about the dead woman again. Sprawled on the bed, on her back, thrown halfway down onto the floor by the impact of the bullet. Her still, questioning face framed by blonde hair. Lena glimpsed purple lingerie under the woman's black bathrobe. Not expensive, but pretty. Not the kind you wear for work.

Lena looks at the burning candle on the table. The flame dances in a slow draft from the window. She reaches out to snuff it, then pauses and pulls her hand back. The candle had probably been lit by the victim. A tiny, transient legacy.

A voice comes from the bedroom. “Detective?”

“What?” Lena says, still looking at the candle.

One of the forensics, a young man with freckles and a large silver ring in his ear, stands in the kitchen door.

“We have secured two sets of fingerprints,” he says. “One by a woman, another by a man. The woman’s prints are everywhere, so we reckon they belong to the victim. Those left by the man are in many places, too. They’re definitely by someone who comes here often.”

“Any sign of the weapon?” Lena asks.

He shakes his head. “We haven’t had time to search the flat thoroughly, but I wouldn’t be surprised if the shooter still has it. There aren’t that many places in here where it can be hidden, at least not quickly.”

Lena nods, and the forensic leaves for the bedroom.

“Tell me about the suspect,” Lena says to Agnes. “I know even less than the patrols.” She glances at her phone. No missed calls. No messages.

Before the night grows much older, that will change; while she listens to the forensic, a handful of officers at the central police headquarters are putting together details and circumstances for the coordination brief later. She loathes those meetings. Everyone available, including her, should be on the scene or the streets, looking, thinking, asking questions.

“Here we are.” Agnes slips out a paper from the back of the pile. “This is from Ola Larsson, a neighbour. His door’s opposite the one to this flat.”

“What did he say?”

“He saw a man standing in the hall a few minutes after he heard the shot. He was looking in the peephole, but moved away when he saw someone there.”

“Sensible man,” Lena murmurs. “So the front door to this flat was open all the time?”

“According to the witness, yes,” Agnes says.

“Did Ola see the man’s face?”

Agnes browses the handwritten statement and shakes her head. “I’m afraid not.”

“So how does Ola know it was a man?”

“He remembers the jacket. Dark blue with white print on the back. He didn’t know what the print reads or the man’s name, but he said a man wearing this jacket has been seeing Molly since a few months back.”

Lena nods. “Go on.”

“Ola also said he’d met the same man several times in the stairwell. One morning he helped the man in question get the snow off his car.”

“Imagine that,” Lena says. She pokes with her pen at a pile of Post-it notes and postcards on the windowsill. The forensic team would scream if they saw her, but clues like to hide everywhere. Especially in the open.

Agnes frowns at Lena. “Imagine getting snow off a car?”

“I meant imagine we’re lucky,” Lena replies. “At least someone has seen him. But Ola didn’t see the man’s face tonight, right?” she asks. “Only the jacket?”

The officer nods. “I’m afraid so. But he’s sure it is the same person.”

“I see. What does he look like?”

“According to Ola, he’s in his late thirties or early forties. Short dark hair. A bit chubby, no glasses, usually stubble. Not shabby, he said, but a little worn. About five foot six. Friendly. Smiles a lot, apparently.”

Lena nods, lost in thought. Chatting with the neighbours, not skulking. That makes the man her boyfriend. “Did Ola mention other men coming here?”

“He hasn’t seen any. I asked.”

“I thought as much,” Lena said. “Although if she were cheating, her lover would’ve kept a low profile.” She pauses. “Did Molly own a car?”

“She had a license, but there’s no car registered in her name.”

Lena pushes a crumpled sheet from the pile of papers over to Agnes, who looks at it and then back at Lena.

“A car mechanic receipt?” Agnes asks.

“Two weeks old,” Lena says. “It’s got the license plate details. I bet it belongs to the man we’re looking for.” She takes the note and walks towards the front door. “Call in and check the number plates.”

“Where are you going?”

“Down to the street. If it’s his car, it might still be here.”

*

John

John awakes in a blizzard.

Slowly, he forces an eye open and looks around. He is naked, lying flat on his stomach while a strong wind tugs at his hair. Coating his body is a powdering of snow, so cold it burns like hot ash.

He tries to lift his arm, but it is too heavy, perhaps frozen to the ground. There are no other sensations; the rest of his body is lifeless, numbed by the freezing gale. He tries to move his head, but patches of frost have bolted his cheek to the ground.

John relaxes again. Moving leads to pain and effort; being still means only pain. Better to lie down and sink away. To let go, give in to the chill, and float down into the black well he senses underneath him. It is close, only a thought away.

“John.”

He blinks and wills his eyes to stay open.

A flickering, yellow light illuminates the patch he lies sprawled on, but he cannot see the source of the light. Farther away are dark cliffs rising into the murk and forming walls that curve around him. There are no openings or crevices where he can hide from the wind. The ground beneath him is icy to the touch, almost perfectly flat, and as unyielding as stone.

He is trapped at the bottom of a chasm filled with a glacial storm. The weak glow around him is the only light he sees. If there are any smells, they are sterilized by the icy gale. A faint notion of something important hangs in his mind, a thing forgotten or lost, but raw ache has dissolved the thought.

“John.”

There it is again, a shrill voice calling a name. He realises it is his name, although he has no memory of being called John before this moment.

Groaning, he tries to lift his head again, but his cheek could have been welded to the ground. No, not ground. The surface is too cool and smooth.

It is ice. A frozen lake covered by snow and surrounded by towering cliffs. Why he is here, or where he is, he does not know, and has no interest in finding out.

“John, come on.”

Someone is screaming his name close to his ear, but he cannot turn to see who it is. Once more, he closes his eyes and begins to drift towards that dim, welcoming depth.

As he fades away, the voice speaks again, a mutter in the glacial wind.

“*John.* Oh, for fuck’s sake–”

Something strikes John’s face hard. His head rings from the blow, but the pain also lifts him up from oblivion and forces him towards consciousness. With a groan, he rips his cheek from the ice and looks around.

Squatting on the ice close to his head is a woman in her early twenties, rocking on the balls of her feet and frowning. Her eyes are so green they are almost black. She is dressed in a gray woollen coat, large blue boots and pink knitted mittens with a matching hat pulled down low. A bag hangs from her shoulder on a thin strap.

On the ice next to her stands a robust old-fashioned lantern, the candle inside shielded from the storm by glass panes fitted in black metal frames.

“About time,” the woman cries over the wind. “You had me worried. Can you stand up?” She pushes the hat back from her eyes, sniffles and wipes her nose with a gloved hand.

Wincing with every movement, John tries to rise, and this time he succeeds. Forcing himself into a sitting position takes half a minute and leaves him wheezing. He shivers as he tries to focus on the woman by his side.

“Good,” she says and nods. “Now get on your feet. No? Hang on.” She holds the hoop of her lantern between her teeth, grabs John under his armpits, pulls him upright, and drags him backwards,

towards the cliffs. “Here we go,” she calls in his ear. “Just a little farther.”

“Where are we going?” John hangs limp from her hands; even raising his voice is exhausting.

“Anywhere not here. Look at your feet, John.”

John looks down. The tracks left by his heels are quickly wiped out by the wind. His body feels like a dead weight anchored to his consciousness. The wind is no longer cold or hot; all he feels is the pressure of the gusts. This worries him. Snow is supposed to be cold, or at least uncomfortable.

“I’m naked,” John says, too disoriented to be embarrassed.

“Of course you’re naked,” the woman replies. “That’s not what I meant. Look at the *ice*, John.”

John shifts his focus to the dark surface where it is visible through the snow. Black fissures are shooting through the ice, cracking and snapping like shadow lightning bolts.

“The ice is breaking,” John says.

“It is indeed.” The woman pauses to swipe her forehead. “My maker, you’re heavy. Are you sure you can’t walk on your own?”

“I can’t feel my legs. I’m sorry.”

“Don’t worry.” The woman grunts and continues to drag him towards the mountain wall. “I’ve carried heavier loads than this,” she says. “More often than I care to remember.”

“Where are you taking me?” John asks, hoping she can hear him above the wind.

Her laugh is strained. “I could ask you the same,” she says, “but getting you off the ice is a good start.”

John looks back at the ice, now a dense web of cracks and crevices. “I never learned how to swim,” he whispers.

“You can’t move,” the woman points out, “so how could you possibly swim anyway?” She shakes her head. “Besides, that’s not water under the ice.”

John tries to frown, but his forehead is too numb. “Then what is it?”

“Something much worse.”

They reach a short stretch of uneven stone between the ice and the base of the mountain. The woman stops, lowers John to the ground, puts down the lantern, then crouches close beside him. They have cleared the lake, but they have no cover.

The woman looks around. “We have to get out of this storm. Think, John. Don’t you want to hide?” she asks. “Somewhere cosy and safe, and maybe warm? If you can, a place with hot chocolate?”

John, naked and curled up on the frozen stone, twists his head a fraction to look up at her face. “Are you joking?” he stammers. “Of course I want to hide.”

A majestic shudder rocks the lake and the surrounding mountain walls, sending splinters of ice cascading over John and the woman. Sheets of snow land with dull crashes around them.

“In your own time,” she says with a pained grin. “But right now would be good.”

John moans and leans his head on the rock. Nothing makes sense. He tries to think beyond the cold and the dark, but there is nothing but shadows where his memories used to reside, ghosts of scents and motion escaping his attempts to catch them. All he has is a name, a failing body, and the company of a woman who is talking in circles. No past, a painful present, and a short future.

The woman talked about a hideaway. Any form of cover would be a blessing, but he sees nothing around him that can help him. A frozen lake at the feet of forbidding rocks capped with night. And the ice is giving way to something underneath. He cannot picture anything worse than the cold, but the woman stares fixedly at the lake, her nostrils flaring in fear.

But one string of certainty holds John suspended upright: He is not dreaming. There is a sense of finality to the lake, a brutal and unyielding realness to the cold and the rock. The lake, though, is different, more a doorway than a pool. Up here, he can breathe and think, but he knows there will be no place or time for reflection if he falls through the ice.

His eyes dart around the lake, searching the cliff walls for a crack, a cleft, a ledge, anything to ward off the cold and to get away from whatever is ascending from the bottom of the lake. His

thoughts race as he searches. A safe place, a warm pocket to hide from the chaos, the vicious cold, the–

“Perfect,” the woman shouts and points along the wall to their right.

A dozen steps away is a large rectangular shape, thigh-high and covered in snow. As the woman drags and pushes John closer, he sees that it is a table. A massive dinner table, with a thick slab of polished brown oak supported by stout, carved legs.

“Impossible,” John whispers, but he does not resist when the woman pulls him towards the table.

*

John

John runs down the road, pausing to ask people walking in the other direction if they have seen the man John follows. He keeps his description brief: male, dark hair, dark shoes, blue pants, red backpack.

Most people he asks hesitate, shake their heads, and frown at John's socks. John says the man he is looking for is mentally ill but harmless. The man has stolen John's shoes. This makes a few nod, in doubt or concern. A woman points down the street, towards the underground trains. John thanks her and runs on.

A minute later John sprints down a flight of stairs overshadowed by sixteen storeys of glass and concrete. When he enters Brommaplan's open-air bus terminal, he stops and looks around.

Commuters mill around the area, moving between underground station, crowded grocery shops, fast-food franchises, a liquor store, and dozens of bus shelters. Some hurry towards the shops that encircle the nearby large roundabout. The weather mutes all sounds, but the hum of cars carries through the air like a murmur. Falling snow obscures everything outside the plaza.

In front of John, red local buses crawl along the streets as they make their way around trees bent by layers of snow. An underground train rattles past on a viaduct and slows down as it nears the station platform. People march past John without looking up, their faces turned to the ground to ward off the biting wind.

John walks towards the entrance of the underground station and stops outside the glass doors. Inside the hall, people fill the escalator that leads up to the platform. Everyone who enters the underground train passes through the manned ticket control or one of the turnstiles. Two security guards lounge near the ticket controller, chatting idly while their hands rest on their batons.

After a moment, John turns away and looks around the bus terminal. Facing the station is a hamburger franchise with an empty outdoor serving area. On warmer days, vendors in thick clothes offer vegetables and flowers

from heated stalls right outside the station. Today the stalls are closed, snow piling up against the shutters.

Past the closed stalls, three men on a bench are laughing and gesturing. One of the men holds a wine bottle. They seem oblivious to the cold.

John walks over to the men and looks down at them. Their faces glow red in the snowfall. Grimy clothes, sluggish movements, broken blood vessels riddling their cheeks. A sour cloud of alcohol and lament.

“Evening,” one of the men says and looks up at John. He is severely underweight and sports a thin beard that reaches halfway down his worn alpine jacket. Suddenly aware of John’s presence, the other two men turn to John. Suspicion glazes their eyes.

“I’m looking for a man,” John says and describes how Molly’s murderer was dressed. “Have you seen him? He went too far, if you know what I mean. Took too many. I’m really worried; if he passes out, he’ll freeze to death.” The mental illness card won’t work with these men, John suspects, but perhaps another addict will spark some sympathy.

The men on the bench look at each other. One of them loses interest and turns back to nursing the bottle in his scarred hands. Another man shrugs and shakes his head, but the bearded man nods. “Yeah, I’ve seen him. He was here a minute ago. He’s your friend?”

“Sure,” John says and nods keenly.

The man shakes his head. “He should give the drink a break. Looks like a walking skeleton, you know? He’ll be dead inside a month.” He spits in the snow between his boots. “Seen it happen before.”

“Where are your shoes?” The man who had gone back to drinking is pointing at John’s feet. “Hey, I’ve got socks just like those. Aren’t you cold? You could lose your toes, you know.”

“You’re right,” John says, “but I need to find my friend quickly. Do you know where he went?”

The bearded man points to the underground station. “He took a train. About twenty minutes ago, something like that. Looked like he was in a hurry.”

John looks at the station. Rush hour. Trains in two directions every three minutes, security guards, cameras on the trains. He knows the man’s clothes but not his face. Finding the killer there will be difficult, if not impossible.

In the distance are sirens, coming closer.

John turns back to the men. “Have you seen him here at Brommaplan before?”

“Yeah, he’s a regular,” the bearded man says and shrugs. “I think he scores from–”

One of his friends, an obese man with a skin condition, elbows the man, who catches the hint and falls silent.

John does not need to hear the rest of the sentence. “Who does he score from, did you say?”

Now nervous, the men shake their heads and mumble that they have no idea. Inside the station hall, the guards are looking John’s way.

John runs again, this time north, away from the underground station. He jogs past banks, kiosks, and a post office. Cars swerve and drivers curse as he rushes across a large roundabout. He crosses the knee-high, untouched snow in its centre, runs over the lanes on the other side, and walks into the parking lot of a gas station. Behind rows of gas pumps is a small shop.

John walks in and inspects the shelves. Racks packed with magazines, oil cans, batteries, takeaway meals and soft drinks. Stacks of shovels, packs of ice scrapers, semi-obscured pornography and bundles of expensive firewood. Near the counter, glistening sausages roll on a grill under bright fluorescent lights. In a far corner is an open cardboard box brimming with discounted summer-season wares.

John walks over to the discount box. Cheap badminton rackets, inflatable bath toys, plastic jugs, sunglasses and water guns. And, underneath the bric-a-brac, cheap unbranded shoes.

He takes a pair of black canvas shoes and walks to the checkout, leaves the shoes on the counter, and goes back to the discount box for a pair of binoculars and three pairs of grey fleece socks. He returns to the counter and places the socks and the binoculars on top of the shoes, then adds a box of twenty chocolate bars and a disposable cigarette lighter.

The young woman behind the counter looks wide-eyed at John. She holds a pen close to her side.

“Is there a problem?” John asks.

“No,” the woman says quickly. “Of course not.” She flashes a smile and clears her throat. “It’s just, you know, we’re close to the liquor store. Sometimes we get strange people. And, well, you have no shoes.”

“I’m not one of those people,” John says and smiles. “My shoes just fell apart. Ripped them open on the gas pedal. One of those freak accidents.”

“I’m sorry,” the woman says. “I didn’t mean to stare. I’m just skittish. Ten minutes left on a long shift. But hey, then it’s the weekend.” Her fingers tremble as she punches the buttons on the till.

“I hope you’ll enjoy it,” John says and swipes his card in the credit card reader.

“Right,” she replies and nods. “I’m sure I will. You too.” She stuffs the wares into a plastic bag, gives it to John, and snatches her hand back.

John thanks her and leaves.

He pauses outside the door to put on the socks and the shoes. The rest of his purchases are tucked down into the black bag.

Then he runs again, towards the station, past the shops and the men on the bench and the station. His feet hurt, but they will have to carry him. When he spots a cash machine between a chemist and a bank, he slows down, walks past the queue, and inserts his card.

“Hey.” A man in a black leather jacket lowers his mobile phone and taps John’s shoulder. “I’m talking to you. There’s a line, you know? Your place is at the back.”

“I’m in a hurry.” John enters his code and waits for the machine to respond.

“Who isn’t?” the man says. “Will you move, or do I have to move you?”

John turns to face the man while the cash machine processes the withdrawal. Behind the man are five other people, all of them looking everywhere except at John and the man in front of him.

“Do you want me to break your teeth?” the man asks, his face growing red.

John studies the man’s eyes and says nothing.

“Come on, let’s go.” The man balls his fists at his sides and breathes hard, but he doesn’t move. Behind John, the cash machine churns and clicks. A child starts to cry at the back of the queue.

“Yes?” John asks, still holding the man’s eyes.

“I – oh, fuck this. Whatever.” The man walks away, pausing to look over his shoulder as if to make sure John is not following him.

John turns back to the cash machine, pockets the ejected notes, and leaves. After turning a corner, he runs under the viaduct, past the tower

block and back up the hill, cutting across unfenced backyards and keeping away from sidewalks.

He has to go back to where it began. A few more stops and he will know the face of his enemy.

Then the true hunt will start.

*

Inside the petrol station, the woman behind the counter watches John vanish into the spiralling snow. She is still clutching the pen by her side. After a moment, she shivers, as if touched by the draught from an open door.

*

Lena

Lena scans the street through the clouds of steam from her breath. Behind her, a police officer makes sure only residents enter the block. Those who leave are pressed for statements.

Two officers have joined Agnes in the flat along with the forensic team. Three police cars and one ambulance are parked in clumsy angles between the vehicles along the sidewalks, slowing down traffic to a zigzag crawl. Their lights turn the area into a spinning inferno of blues and reds.

The snowfall makes it impossible to see car number plates more than a dozen metres away, so Lena zips up her jacket and walks down the street, peering at the cars while whispering the license plate number she found on the receipt in the flat. Six damned characters and she struggles to remember them. Her short-term memory has always been bad, and lack of sleep does not help. The car probably will not be here, but staying in the flat was unbearable. This is a good excuse to get out.

The phone in her pocket buzzes. She stops, digs it out, and shields the screen from the snow with her hand. Her superintendent calling from the headquarters in the city. She takes the call.

“Franke,” Lena says and continues down the sidewalk. Three more cars, then she will cross the street and double back.

“This is Gren,” her commander says. “Are you preparing the briefing?”

“I’m still at the scene.”

There is a long pause, but Lena knows what he will say. Gren wants her to set up the meeting, but he knows she wants to scour the area first. In the silence she hears the background mumble of the office, and she pictures Gren sitting straight-backed behind his desk, wearing his crisp shirt and his permanent, slightly pained grimace.

She checks the next number plate while she waits for Gren to respond. The superintendent is by-the-book and overprotective, but to his credit, he trusts and listens to his people.

He is also plagued by self-blame, even though he thinks no one knows. Perhaps Lena can see through his façade more easily than most others could; after all, she is the cause of some of his angst.

“All right,” Gren says eventually. “What do you have so far?”

“A lot of statements.” Lena is surprised he doesn’t insist on her setting up the briefing quicker. “One of them is pretty extensive,” she says. “Lots of details. Agnes did a good job.”

“That’s good news.”

“A neighbour gave a clear description of the suspect,” Lena says, “although he didn’t see the man’s face. Not tonight, that is. But the suspect is – I mean, was – Molly’s boyfriend, so the neighbour has met him before. And we’ve got a car registration number that we’re looking up.”

“Understood,” Gren says. “Any fingerprints? Anything that can tie the suspect to the shooting? Are the forensics done?”

“Nothing definite yet. I’m looking for the car as we speak. We found the numbers on a receipt in the flat.” She watches snowflakes arc down through the glow of the street lights. A long, peaceful flight, a moment in the light, and it is over. No such luck for the woman in the flat.

“Have you talked to the prosecutor?” Gren asks.

Lena shakes her head and sighs. Sometimes she wonders if her boss is paid on the basis of how many questions he asks per day.

“I’ll call him.” She stops and turns to cross the street. “Eight officers are searching for the suspect at the moment. Like I said, we have a close description. He might still be armed.”

“Thanks. Anything else?”

“He’s in his socks.”

“Come again?”

“The suspect took off his shoes before he fled the scene. They were bloodied, so I think he was afraid he’d leave tracks.”

“I see,” Gren says. “That’s a pretty calculating thing to do after shooting someone.”

“And stupid,” Lena agrees, although the thought does not sit right with her. A panicked idiot would not have made it far in this weather, but so far, he is eluding her.

“I have to go,” Gren says. “I’m already getting phone calls from above. I’ll call back soon.”

“Right.” Lena ends the call, pockets her phone, and slows down near a white car. It is parked outside the entrance of a small convenience store, not

far from the flat. She looks at the plates and runs through the numbers in her mind. They match.

The car is a white Opel delivery van. Apart from a few scratches, it looks almost new. A large logotype on the van's side reads *Argenti Advertising* in blue letters. She circles the van and glances through its windows to make sure the vehicle is empty. At least the front seats; one or more people could easily fit inside the windowless loading compartment.

She keeps her eyes on the van while she presses a key on her phone.

Agnes answers almost immediately. "Have you found anything?" she asks.

"His van's right outside," Lena says.

"I'm on my way."

Thirty seconds later, Agnes trudges through the snow and stops next to Lena. "Is this the one?" she asks, nodding at the white Opel.

Lena nods. "Did you tell the forensics?"

"They'll be here in a few minutes." Agnes studies the van in silence. "Do you think he panicked?"

"The killer?" Lena crosses her arms across her chest and rubs her arms. "Probably," she says. "That would explain why he left his shoes behind. But unless he's back indoors, he'll soon freeze his feet off."

Several witnesses have pointed down the street towards the underground station, so she sent four officers that way. She has also alerted the underground management to make sure no trains stop at Brommaplan. Another escape route cut off.

Buses leave the terminal near the underground station in all directions, but the gridlock means most buses drive at less than walking speed. A warning has been issued over radio to all drivers. The shooter will not get away by public transport.

"Do you reckon he'll come back here?" Agnes asks.

"There's no telling what's going through his mind," Lena says. "But yes, he might come back. At any rate, he'll break down as soon as his pain outgrows his panic. He might even turn himself in."

Statistically, it was almost certain that the boyfriend was the murderer, and this had all the hallmarks of a jealousy crime. But a stubborn edge of unease tells her that the scenario is more fractured. She needs to shake the kaleidoscope to get a better picture.

Lena's phone beeps: a text message. She checks it and then touches Agnes's arm to get her attention. "They've matched the number plates."

Lena and Agnes jog to Agnes's car and sit down in the front seats. Agnes presses a button, and details flash onto the screen of the car's communication unit.

"The suspect's name is John Peter Andersson," Lena says, repeating the information to herself as she reads. "Forty-two years old, lives in Grimsta. Works for Argenti Advertising. Lone occupant at the address. A few previous addresses, all of them west of the city. No criminal history."

The photo from John's driver's licence is attached to the file. Unkempt and thinning dark hair, slightly overweight, two-day stubble. His bright blue eyes are unfocused, as if his thoughts are elsewhere.

"Grimsta isn't far," Agnes says. "Five stops from here with the underground train, then a fifteen-minute walk. Or ten minutes by car if we cut through the suburbs. Make that twenty in this weather."

Lena nods. She has been there before. A sprawling group of three-storey houses below Vällingby, a refurbished fifties-era shopping centre with a small bus terminal and an underground station. The district's major hub.

A quiet place, she recalls. The impression had been reinforced by the nearby nature reserve, a dense carpet of old pine trees, rocky ground and winding paths.

"We'll go by car." Lena reaches for her radio. "Franke calling patrol Caesar Twelve," she says.

The radio hisses and spits static for a few seconds before the reply comes. "Caesar Twelve here."

"The suspect's address is Bjurvagen 12 in Grimsta. His photo and file are online. It's the victim's boyfriend," she adds. "It's unlikely that he's there, but we're going to have a look."

"Understood."

"Any sign of the suspect where you are?" Lena asks.

"Nothing yet, but a lot of people think they've seen him around the shops outside the Brommaplan underground station. We've got a lot of confused statements."

"All right. Over and out."

Lena releases the button and slips her radio into her pocket. Provided that a prosecutor is available, they can fast-track a search warrant while

they drive to Grimsta. She turns to Agnes, who is peering through the windows of the car.

“We’ll leave the car to the forensics,” Lena says. “I don’t want John to hole up at home. Do you know the way?”

Agnes nods. “It’s been a while since I was there, but I remember. It’s along the underground, the left.”

“I’ll follow your car.” As Lena turns to open the car door, she glances at the corner shop near Molly’s flat.

A man behind the counter inside the shop is looking at Lena through the yellow-tinted window. Middle Eastern, lean and wiry, in his fifties, sporting a thick beard and a black beanie.

Less than five seconds pass before he looks away, but Lena has seen enough: there had been more than curiosity on his face. *Sadness*, she thinks. *Caution. Perhaps guilt.*

Or fear.

“Wait here,” Lena says. “I’ll be right back.” She steps out of the car, squinting at the corner shop.

“Where are you going?” Agnes calls after Lena.

“I’m having a quick word with the shopkeeper.”

*

John

The woman scrambles in under the table on the ice and drags John in after her. A moment after he pulls his feet in, a large part in the centre of the ice breaks apart and falls down into the gaping lake, as if there is only air underneath.

Cowering under the table, John watches the hole in the ice grow larger. The wind wanes away, and the loud cracking stops. After a short while, the snow ceases its mad dance and falls in vertical lines around the table, twinkling in the light of the woman's lantern. Silence rushes in to replace the pandemonium.

But the calm is brief; soon a sound wells up from the hole. There is a hint of a melody, an outline of a tune, steadily gaining in strength and rising in pitch. A few keening, drawn-out notes sung by a flute-like voice.

A woman's voice. A song.

"Don't listen." The woman clutches John's arm and pulls him away.

"What?" John stares at the hole and shivers as the tones wash over him. It throws wires around him, pulling him closer while throwing off flares in his mind. The notes are shards, spinning and drilling. He knows they will hurt if he touches them, but he cannot resist.

"Cover your ears," the woman says, raising her voice. "Fight it, damn you. It won't give up easily, not while you're so near."

He wants to look at the woman by his side, but the song has him transfixed. "Who won't give what up?" he asks.

The woman grimaces and clamps her mittens over John's ears. He turns and frowns at her, but he is too tired to fend off her hands. Fragments of the song trickle through the wool that covers his ears, and while it is reduced to a distant whisper, the hazy tones still touch him, hook his attention, and reel him in.

John shivers again and looks at the woman who presses her hands to his ears. Tangles of blonde hair pour out under a hat much too large for her head. Her lips are wide and curved, and her eyes are vaguely almond-shaped. One of her front teeth is a little crooked.

He knows her from somewhere. The lines of her jaw, the shape of her eyelids, her posture, the way she frowns and tilts her head. Taken aback by this new memory, he tries to place her face, for the moment forgetting about the ice.

“Who are you?” John whispers.

The woman raises her eyebrows and removes her hands. “That’s better.”

“What’s better?”

“You recognize me.” Her eyes flicker to the ice, and John follows her gaze.

The singing has stopped. Where cracks had riddled the ice, snow is settling on an undamaged surface. A strong wind still circles the wall, but it is much weaker than the storm that shook him moments earlier. Were it not for how his tracks had been partially erased, he would have thought he hallucinated the song.

“It’s gone back,” the woman says, “but we can’t stay here. It’ll come back in force when it realizes we’re escaping. We have a minute, maybe two. So focus, John. As hard as you possibly can. Please?”

John stares at her, then closes his eyes and rubs his forehead with his hands. For every question he asks, she offers another riddle. He is lost, naked and–

“I’m warm.” John holds his hands in front of his face and flexes his fingers. He is still naked, sitting under the table inches from mounds of snow, but he is no longer freezing. Even the ice underneath him is balmy. He puts his hands outside the table and quickly pulls them back; beyond the table legs, the air is Arctic.

For the first time since waking up, he is acutely aware of his nakedness, so he tries to shift into a more modest position. When he looks up, he makes out faint patterns and thin cracks in the brown woodwork.

All of them are familiar. There is a hint of a face, back there a tree, over there a cloud. Although the size of the table still baffles him: it is built for giants, or at least people at least twice his height.

“Nice, don’t you think?” the woman asks. “Warm and cosy. Just what we hoped for.” She puts the lantern between them and pulls off her gloves. “Good timing, too. A little longer and we’d have been done for.” She makes a concerned face and shakes her head.

That voice, the gesture, all those mannerisms. They are as familiar to John as the table. “Who are you?” he asks.

“I really want to tell you,” she says and glances at John. “But I can’t. I’m sorry. It has to come to you without my help. That’s the rule. One of the many,” she adds and sighs.

John frowns and works his mouth as he searches his memory. A name drifts in his mind, a few syllables tied together by her appearance. He reaches for the cobwebs of sounds and almost catches them.

“Maria?” he suggests, then shakes his head. Close but wrong. Her name is longer, richer, overlaying her features better.

“Miriam?” he ventures.

She snaps her fingers and smiles. “Well done. Now that we know each other, how about–”

He shakes his head and holds up a hand; he has to find a foothold, or he will start to cry. “I remember your name,” he says, “nothing else. Where did you come from? And where are we?”

“For someone who’s been near freezing to death,” Miriam says, “you have a lot of questions.”

“But I can’t remember a thing.” John presses his palms to his eyelids. “I was somewhere, on my way to something important. Then I–” He falls silent and groans. His memory is blank. Groping for recollections is like rummaging in an empty sack. A vast, dark bag where anything can hide.

Miriam pats his arm. “It’ll come back to you once we’re on our way.” She opens her bag and hands John a folded pile of clothes. “Put these on. It’s warmer farther up, but not much.”

John accepts the clothes with a mumbled, “Thank you.” The pile holds a pair of paled blue jeans with patched knees; a large,

chequered flannel shirt in red and black; and a black beanie. Spots of crusted paint stain the shirt. He has never seen the clothes before, yet their shape and texture make his hands tingle. The jeans would be tight, the sleeves of the shirt too long. How he knows, he has no idea. It is a question for later.

He pulls the hat on and squirms into the jeans and the shirt, keeping his back turned to Miriam while trying not to put his arms or legs outside the table. Thank the heavens that he does not have to be naked anymore. He needs to count his blessings until his memory comes back.

Once he is dressed, he turns back to Miriam. “I know you,” he says. “But I haven’t got a clue who you are, or how I got here. I need to know. I can’t even remember where I–”

Miriam holds a thin finger to her lips and makes a warning motion with her other hand. John looks out at the lake. For a moment, he thinks he hears a faint cracking sound. Snowflakes flurry along the walls as the wind picks up.

“Go slowly,” she whispers. “I want to help. But there are rules. I don’t understand half of them, but such is life. And if you want to make it out of here, we need to move on.”

“Rules?” John wraps the shirt closer around himself; the chill is seeping in under the table and reaching under his clothes. The warmth is fading away. “You mean laws?”

“Yes.”

“Are we trespassing?”

She purses her lips. “In a way,” she says.

The light from her lantern flickers and dims, then slowly returns. The glow is weaker than it was moments earlier. Frowning, Miriam lifts the lantern from the ground, pulls up a glass pane, and turns a tiny wheel to roll out new wick. When the light grows stronger, she nods in approval and snaps the glass back in place.

“You mean the laws here are different than in–” John swallows and shakes his head. He has forgotten even what country he is from. He must have struck his head hard against the ice when he fell. “Different to where I came from?” he finishes.

Miriam looks up at him. “Oh, John,” she says softly. Her face is lit from underneath by the warm glow. “You really are lost, aren’t you? No wonder I had to come all the way down here to find you.”

John nods. “I don’t know what I’ve forgotten,” he says, “but I know I must remember it.”

She moves closer to him and cups his head in her hands. Her mittens smell of kerosene and wet wool. “Don’t you have an inkling what’s happened?” she asks and touches his temples with her thumbs. “A small, tiny notion tickling away in there?”

John shakes his head. “I’m near a mountain. And it’s winter.” He pauses. “Have I been skiing?”

Miriam sighs. “We haven’t got time for this.” She has to raise her voice to be heard; the wind is growing into a gale again. One last time, John reaches for the remnants of his shredded memory, but a sharp snap from the ice close to his feet startles him. The cracks are reappearing.

John pulls his feet back. “Do you know a way out?”

“I know where not to go.” Miriam shoves her hands down her mittens. “The rest is up to you, but the shelter is here for a reason. It’s a sign. There should be – ah.” She holds her lantern closer to the mountain wall behind the table.

When John looks over Miriam’s shoulder, he sees the light disappear into a jagged opening, a few steps wide and not much higher.

“A tunnel?” he shouts.

There had been no sign of an exit when he scanned the walls after waking up. This opening is small, but he is sure he should have spotted it. The tunnel must have sprung into being as incredibly as the table. Small, low, and utterly dark, it seems to drink the lantern’s glow.

And he knows that he has to enter it.

*

Lena

A bell jingles as Lena opens the door, then again as the door swings shut behind her.

The shop is not much bigger than her flat, which in turn is the size of most of her friends' kitchens. Two strip lights in the ceiling illuminate half a dozen shelves loaded with wares essential for the desperate or absent-minded: White bread, discount DVDs, canned beans, fruit-scented shampoos and microwave meals. Dirty snow streaks the linoleum floor. A whiff of incense hangs in the humid air. She is the only customer in the shop.

She walks over to the counter, faces the man whose eyes she met through the window, and waits for him to speak.

"Can I help?" he says. His voice is deeper than Lena expects.

Lena reaches for her inner pocket. "I'm Detective Lena Franke," she says. "I'd like to ask you a few questions."

He nods to the window. "I saw you come. I heard the shot."

Lena studies the man. He doesn't ask if someone has fired a gun; he already knows. She shows him her badge and puts it away.

"What's your name?" she asks.

"Abbaas," he replies. "Abbaas Kouri. What has happened to Molly?"

Lena hesitates. "I can't give you that information right now."

The man's face falls, and he mutters what Lena suspects is a curse in what might be Arabic. Somehow, he knows what has taken place, or at least that Molly was hurt.

"Have you recently seen a man in a blue jacket?" Lena asks. "About my height, dark hair. In his early forties. No shoes. Possibly carrying a large dark bag."

Abbaas starts to nod halfway through Lena's question. In one of his hands is a wad of large notes, but the till is closed.

"I know who you're looking for. I saw him not long ago. Ten minutes, maybe. He's wearing shoes now."

Lena tenses at the unexpected load of information. "Where did you see him?" she asks.

“Here.”

“What?” Lena looks around the shop in disbelief. Perhaps John came back to watch the scene, or maybe he left something behind. At least he might still be in the neighbourhood.

“Do you know where he went?” Lena asks.

“I am sorry.” Abbaas shakes his head. “I would tell you if I knew, but I have no idea.”

Lena runs to the door and flings it open. “He’s nearby,” she shouts to Agnes. “Get on the radio and call the patrols closer. He was here only ten minutes ago.” She leaves the door open and stalks back to the man behind the counter. “Tell me exactly what the man said,” she demands. “What he bought, everything he did. Think hard.”

“John is in trouble, isn’t he?”

“Please answer the question. Did the man say anything out of the ordinary?”

Abbaas takes a deep breath. “Yes.” He sighs. “You could say that.”

“Go on.” Lena takes out her notepad. Whatever John has done here will be a valuable lead. She gets the man’s name and phone number.

“What did the man do in your shop?” she asks.

“He bought my computer. Paid in cash. I got a good price.”

Frowning, Lena looks up from her notepad. “Why would he do that?” she asks. “Did he seem irrational? Or shocked?”

“No,” Abbaas replies quietly. “Not irrational.” He glances upwards at the ceiling, towards Molly’s flat. “I heard what happened to her. A neighbour came in and told me. You know that John and she were together?”

“How do you know?”

“He talked about her. John came to visit her often, and he used to buy her chocolate. Flowers too, when I have them.”

“I see.” Lena stares at her notepad. One day John is courting her, the next he arrives as a vengeful killer. It happens more often than she likes to consider.

“Molly was a regular too,” Abbaas continues. “She came many times every week. We talked about the weather, local gossip, things like that. Beautiful woman. Shy.” He searches for a word. “Frail.”

“Why did he buy your computer?” Lena asks, noting that Abbaas uses past tense when he speaks about Molly. The shop is hot and the incense pricks her eyes, but she needs to stay and make sure she learns everything the man knows.

“Look.” Abbaas’s voice is hushed. “John loved Molly very much. I could see it. Every time he came here, he was happy.” He shrugs. “We men don’t often show when we’re happy in that way, but with John, it was written on his face.”

“Sure,” Lena says. Then Molly had cheated on John, and John had cracked like an old vase. A scenario as tragic as it was common. “But the computer?” she pressed. “Why did the man want it?”

“I cannot say for sure.”

A realisation dawns on Lena, and she stops with her pen hovering above the notepad. Returning to a crime scene to gloat is one thing; coming back to buy a computer is a different matter. Add to that statements that describe John in a myriad of ways.

There have been two different men in Molly’s flat.

Once the thought comes to her, she is certain. John has been there, or at least near it, but so has someone else. And only one of the men is the shooter.

“One last question,” Lena says. “Did you ever see this Molly with other men?”

“Never.” Abbaas shakes his head. “Just John.”

“Right.” Lena takes a card from her wallet and leaves it on the counter. “Here’s my number and my email address. If you think of anything else that might help us find him, contact me. Another officer will come by later for a full statement.” She turns away and walks towards the exit, longing for the frigid air outside.

“I think John bought it for the footage,” the man calls after Lena.

Lena stops just inside the door. “What footage?” she asks and turns back. “On the computer?”

“Yes.”

“Footage of what, exactly?”

Abbaas grimaces. “I have a camera outside,” he says. “I don’t have a permit to use one, but I am often alone in the shop.”

“Go on,” Lena says.

“John came in and asked if the camera was real. Some shops have fake ones, but mine works. So I said yes.”

“And then?”

“He asked if it had recorded the last hour. When I said it had, he wanted to buy the footage. It was on my computer. A laptop.”

Lena nods. John wanted to cover his tracks, so he needed the recording in case it shows him leaving the flat. He took a great risk going back to get the film, but she has seen worse. Desperation is the mother of many moronic ideas.

This particular idea had compromised her work in a bad way. The film could have been useful, maybe critical for finding John, and now it was gone.

“You saw us arrive,” Lena says, “and you know the footage could be used as evidence. And you sold it, just like that?” Lena asks.

“No.” Abbaas pauses. “Not ‘just like that’.”

“Did John threaten you?”

Abbaas shakes his head slowly. “He was very polite. Always calm, like always. The reason I sold the computer to John is that he would have taken it anyway.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Lena demands. “You said a moment ago that he didn’t threaten you?”

Abbaas looks up and meets Lena’s eyes. “I came to Sweden in nineteen eighty-two.” He holds up a hand when Lena begins to interrupt him. “Please listen,” he says. “It’s important.”

After a moment, Lena nods.

“I was in a war for about a year,” Abbaas says. “Iran, then Iraq. First in Mehran, after that in the Zagros Mountains. I can see that you do not recognize the names. That doesn’t matter. But this does.

“I met many men who had lost everything. Women, too. Some eventually fled, just like I did. Others broke down and sat on the ground while they waited to die. A few stayed and struggled to survive. But some lost their minds, or maybe I should say their souls. They became very good soldiers. Fearless, efficient, merciless. We called them walking corpses, but never to their faces.”

“John is probably in shock,” Lena says, “and possibly violent, but he’s not suffering from a war trauma.”

“Shock, trauma, madness.” Abbaas shakes his head. “Those are only empty words. Different dresses for the same thing. The people who became good soldiers were once good fathers and loving men, but the war turned them into stone. I’m telling you this because I want to help John. I liked him. He was an honest man.”

“Why the past tense?” Lena asks. “He’s not dead.” She had almost added *in difference to his girlfriend.*

“That,” Abbaas says, “depends on your point of view. Perhaps there is still time. Please, hurry to find him.”

“I hope to.” Lena points at her card on the counter. “Contact me if you can think of anything else, or if John comes back again.” She leaves the shop and finds Agnes waiting for her outside with a question on her face.

“Did he know anything?” Agnes asks.

“John was here,” Lena says. “He bought a computer.”

“In the corner shop?”

“I’ll tell you why on the way to his flat,” Lena says. “There’s more. I’m beginning to think that John isn’t our man. Or rather that he’s one of them.”

Stunned, Agnes looks up from her notepad. “They were a group?”

Lena shakes her head. “One man shot Molly and ran, and John set off after him. Now both of them are gone.”

“Are you sure?”

“Of course not. But I will be, once we’ve pinned John down and brought him in.”

“But if John isn’t–”

“We want both of them. Gren will want to turn all resources to finding the presumed killer, but we have to get John too. Trust me.”

“I do. You know that.”

“Good.” Lena nods in approval but wishes Agnes was not so unquestioning. That blind faith will come back to haunt Agnes if Lena loses control of the case. Or of herself.

“No word from the patrols yet?” Lena asks.

“Nothing new, but they’ve tightened the search. I told them to concentrate on people leaving the area. And I’ve requested backup. Two cars will meet us at the flat as soon as they can.”

Lena turns to Agnes. “Call the forensics and tell them to make sure they cover every spot of the flat when they look for prints. Including the front

door and the walls just outside it."

"I'll call them straight away."

Lena nods absently. In her mind, she goes over what the shop owner has told her. Flowers and smiles, chocolate and frailty. Caring people reduced by atrocities to callous machines.

Some of those women and men would have been hanging by a thread before they fell. Maybe a few had managed to claw their way back from the slide into callousness and returned to daylight, healing themselves by helping others, one compassionate act after another.

Perhaps she could, too.

“Then let’s go,” Lena says. “The storm’s getting worse. Or at least colder.”

*

John walks down a series of stone stairs running through a patch of forest on a crest between Brommaplan and Abrahamsberg. Around him are clusters of low blocks, most of them hidden by hedges and pine trees.

He walks carefully while the wind rips between the trees at his sides. Every step is slippery and obscured under layers of snow. His bag is slung over his shoulder. The folded laptop computer is held tightly under his arm.

On his left, a train rumbles past. Its wheels screech and hiss as it nears Abrahamsberg's station, but the train is still going fast. He turns away as shafts of light from the train's windows sweep over him; the chance that anyone on the train will notice him is minimal, but he cannot take any risks.

While he walked, he watched the trains continue past Brommaplan without stopping. The police had ordered the trains to isolate the station. This surprises him, but it is not a major obstacle. He can find another way to reach his destination. Perhaps the trains will pick up passengers here, one stop away from Brommaplan.

Halfway down the stairs, John pauses to shove the computer deep into his bag; the snow might damage the hardware, and he needs it to work.

"You have to be careful," says a voice behind him.

John pushes the bag behind him and turns around.

A short, plump woman almost twice his age leans on the railing a few steps away. She is breathing laboriously. A transparent raincoat hangs draped over her brown coat.

She peers at John from under the brim of her hat. "I'm sorry if I startled you," she says. "It's the snow. One can't hear a thing. Not cars, not people, nothing. Everything's so quiet."

"You're quite right," John says and smiles at her.

The woman squints and looks at John as he turns back to his bag and pulls the zip halfway shut. When the woman does not move, John slips one hand into the bag and finds one of the knives.

A teenage boy with a large dog on a lead appear at the top of the stairs. The boy descends the stairs, hooting with laughter as the golden retriever bounces down before him, eyes wild and tongue lolling. The boy and his

dog flash between John and the woman and disappear in the darkness at the foot of the stairs.

The woman shakes herself. “You take care now,” she says. “These stairs are treacherous. It’s very easy to fall down.” She turns away and continues her climb, one cumbersome step at a time.

“I’ll make sure to look after myself.” John takes his hand out of the bag and zips it shut. “You have a good evening, now.”

When the elderly woman is out of sight, John walks down to the street. In the distance, the light from Abrahamsberg’s underground station spills out on the snow. The train that passed John earlier slows down, stops, and opens its doors. Abrahamsberg’s station is not shut down.

John runs again, past yellow brick façades, green metal bins and rows of shrubs visible only as carpets of twigs above the snow. The rail crosses Abrahamsberg’s central street on a low viaduct. On the other side of the underground rail is one of Stockholm’s arterial roads, running parallel with the rails. Hundreds of cars clog the four lanes.

He pauses near a closed shoe shop and studies the station on the other side of the street. Inside the station are three turnstiles: two automatic and one manned. Two guards flank the gates and peer closely at those who pass through. Abrahamsberg is a small suburb; even though it is rush hour, the guards have time to inspect everyone that enters the station.

John scans the area. A fence topped with barbed wire separates the pathway from the rails. A woman’s voice from the platform’s PA speakers reminds passengers that no trains stop at Brommaplan. The station is the main source of light, but the whirling snow outside is a grey veil that renders people and buildings into dark shapes.

On John’s right is a fenced-off building site, distinguishable only as a hazy framework of reinforcement bars and cranes. Between the site and the train platform are trees and bushes. Running between them is a pathway, unlit and covered by deep snow.

John crosses the street to the pathway and continues until he is sure that the shadows hide him. Two chimes from the speakers on the platform announce the imminent arrival of a westbound train. A minute later, the train arrives, drops off a handful of commuters, and continues deeper into the suburbs. People trickle out of the station, all of them shielding their eyes

while looking down at their mobile phones. No one walks down the pathway or looks at John.

John finds a stretch where the barbed wire has been cut apart, possibly by some graffiti artist. He waits and listens for the whisper of electricity that precedes the arrival of a train. A few people stand on the other side of the platform. Everyone is looking in the other direction. A camera is mounted to the ceiling over the platform, but it is positioned to cover passengers, not the fence.

John scrambles over the fence, slips just as he balances on its top, and crashes down on the other side. He lies still and makes sure he has not injured himself. No alarms have gone off. The people on the platform are still looking the other way. An arm's length away is the live rail; one touch means instant and ozone-reeking death.

The rail gives off a metallic *ping*. A train is coming.

Crouching, John steps over the live rail, walks up a metal staircase, and enters the platform. Inside the doors where stairs lead down to the ticket control, an old man on a bench frowns at him and turns back to his magazine.

A train arrives thirty seconds later. When the train's doors open, John walks in, finds a seat, and waits for the next stage of the hunt. Soon he will have what he needs. In the meantime, he will rest and regain some of his strength. He must last a little longer.

Slowly, John's eyes close. Soon his head is rolling with the movement of the train. The car shudders, and his jacket shifts to reveal the notes tucked down his inner pocket.

In the seat next to where John is seated, three young men look at each other. They all wear plain black or green jackets, blue jeans, and trainers.

One of the men, ginger, freckled and wiry, points to his own chest. He mouths *pocket* and glances at John.

His friends, a heavyset man with Mediterranean looks, and a slimmer and taller man with close-cropped black hair, follow the first man's gaze. The three men look at each other and smile. No words are said. None are needed. The plan is already agreed and in motion.

"Next stop," the ginger man whispers, and his friends nod in agreement.

In the pale man's pocket, a knife is snapped loose from its sheath.

*

John

John stumbles after Miriam through the tunnel. Only briefly dispelled by Miriam's lantern, the darkness presses in from all sides. If he walks with his hands outstretched, his fingers brush against the cool, wet rock on each side.

Either they are walking uphill, or he is in very bad shape, even considering that he was naked and frozen minutes earlier. Worse, his memory refuses to come back. Cloudy images and distant echoes fill his head like blurred frames from a ruined film reel, but there is no coherence or pattern.

He has to trust Miriam. After all, he knows her, if only by her name. "How are you keeping up?" Miriam looks at him over her shoulder while she walks.

"Are we going up a slope?" John asks.

"I think so. I hope so. The exit is up there somewhere, so we definitely don't want to go down. By the way," she adds, "there's a big room up ahead."

"Have you been here before?"

Miriam laughs. "I told you that this is my turf. And I'm here to help you, as much as I am allowed. Think of me as your personal cerebral Florence Nightingale."

"What?" John frowns at her back in the gloom. "You're a famous bird? Could you just–" He stumbles on the uneven ground and drives his knee down into the stone. A wave of pain spreads from the limb, and he inhales with a sharp hiss.

"Come on, John." Miriam looks over her shoulder again, this time examining the darkness behind them. When John struggles to rise, she pulls him upright, grabs his shoulders, and turns him around to face her.

"Are you all right?" she says, searching his eyes.

"I'm fine."

“You have to keep going. Stay alert. If you see something odd, don’t stop and gape. Do you know what the world’s most famous last words are?”

“I’ve no idea,” John says, rubbing his injured knee.

“They are ‘what’s that?’”

“Really?”

“Really.”

“How come?”

“Because whatever ‘that’ is,” Miriam says, “it’s usually a reason to run.”

John stops and leans against a wall. “Look,” he says. “I have no idea what you’re talking about. You make no sense. *Nothing* makes sense. If it weren’t so damn cold, I would say I was dreaming, because that would explain a lot. Hey, what are you doing?”

Miriam grabs the collar of John’s shirt and pulls him close. Her pupils are black pinpricks in her narrowed eyes. She looks furious, but John knows that there is worry underneath her apparent frustration.

“More talk about dreaming,” Miriam says, her voice dangerously low, “and I will slap you again. I mean it. You are right here, nowhere else. Thinking otherwise is dangerous. I didn’t come all the way down here to see you wander off.”

“Why would I do that?” John struggles in her grip, but he is too weak to push her away. “And where would I go? I’m lost, remember?”

“I mean you have to pay attention. Be spirited. In the moment.”

John makes a disgusted sound. “What’s wrong with you?” he asks. “All I want is a straight answer. Just one. I’m lost, I’m cold and I’m hungry. I have no memories, and I’m wearing someone else’s clothes. And I’m walking through a cave with someone who gives questions for answers. Why the hell are you smiling?”

“Are you angry?” Miriam asks.

“You’re joking, right?”

“Good.” She lets go of him and smoothes his shirt. “You need your fighting spirit. Soppy-eyed whining won’t get us anywhere.”

“Yeah, thanks.” He frowns. “What do you mean ‘slap me again’?” he asks. “Did you hit me earlier?”

“What should I have done?” Miriam asked. “You weren’t exactly attentive. Besides, I hurt my hand. It felt like smacking a block of frozen cod. And those clothes are actually yours.”

He looks down. “They don’t fit.”

“Huh. No little spark of familiarity when you put them on?”

“Well, yes,” he admits. “They feel strange, though. Old.”

Miriam grins. “Almost twenty years. I had to dig deep, but I thought you’d feel comfortable in them.”

John’s arms fall to his sides. “Have you broken into my house?” he asks, unsure if he owns one. He certainly does not have any keys.

Miriam hesitates. “One thing at a time,” she replies. “All will come back to you soon enough. I hope.” She starts to walk up the tunnel again.

John takes a deep breath, lets out a haggard sigh, and falls in step with Miriam. After what he believes is half an hour, the walls curve away and the tunnel widens into a larger room. Miriam stops, and he limps to a halt behind her.

They are surrounded by space instead of rock. He cannot see any walls, but he senses that the room is vast. The darkness around him is pooling and churning, so dense he is surprised he cannot touch it.

“All right,” he says. “Just tell me this one thing. Please.”

Miriam raises her lantern and peers into the darkness in front of them. “What?” she asks.

“Why do I need to find my fighting spirit?”

Miriam turns to face him. “Because you need to overcome things like this,” she whispers, and then twists the wheel at the base of the lantern until the glow lights up the entire room.

When John looks over her shoulder, his face grows slack in disbelief.

“Oh, fuck off,” he whispers.

*

Lena

Lena negotiates the icy road while she fiddles with the stereo to silence a current affairs debate. In the bad reception, the frenzied voices sound like mad wasps trapped in a can.

She turns the radio off, waits a few seconds, turns it on again, and stabs at a button in search of a decent channel. After several tries, a slow growling beat fills the car. A woman's whisper emerges over the deep bass tones. A Friday night dance mix, blissfully free from talking.

She sits back and puts both hands on the steering wheel. Agnes's car is just ahead. Passing through the web of smaller streets alongside the main road is hazardous; many of them are not ploughed. Getting stuck is easy, but in difference to the thousands of cars queuing on the bigger roads, she is still moving. It is a good time to summarize certainties, guesses, and loose ends.

A woman is dead. There are no immediate witnesses of her death. Her boyfriend, killer or not, is on the run and has bought footage of another man. Someone present at the scene and who disappeared. One body, two missing suspects, and no weapon.

The idea that John is not the offender feels more and more likely, but it is crucial to keep her mind open to new evidence and sudden leads. Latching on to one particular theory too early is risky. It is one of the many reasons why the murder of Sweden's prime minister twenty years earlier never had been solved, or so many claimed.

But she needs to know what is on that film.

Her phone buzzes as she clears a small roundabout. She turns down the music and looks at the screen. It is the prosecutor.

"Lena Franke here."

"This is Lars Rosenberg," the prosecutor says. "You have requested a search warrant?"

Lena goes over the details for the warrant while she watches the tail lights of Agnes's car. After a few minutes, they pass under a viaduct where the underground train crosses the road and starts its climb up to Vällingby.

Far away are two hulking office buildings, almost all windows dark. Across the road is a small lake surrounded by thin copses of trees.

She had been here many years ago, at a competition on a shooting range beyond the lake, tucked away behind the sprawling yard of a marina. It had gone well; lack of concentration and technique had been offset by her good eyesight and some luck.

That day had been full of small rushes: the smell of hot cartridges, the gun slamming in her hands, the tight cluster of holes in the paper targets. Press the trigger, open a hole, claim the prize and walk away. Organized and focussed. At a firing range, every shot is neat and clean, small loud textbook procedures.

The real world, she had found later, is anything but tidy.

She runs a hand over her eyes and forces her attention back to her conversation with the prosecutor. “I think that’s it,” she says.

“Anything else?” Lars asks.

“Not for the moment. I’m – I have to hang up.”

Lena ends the call, flings the phone in the passenger seat, and breathes out. The firing range is not close, but she imagines its smells reaching her: oil, fire, friction and attention. Unmoving targets, fluttering and shuddering.

She blinks slowly and stares at the lights ahead. Eyes on the road. Keep driving, think of John and Molly.

Fucking focus.

Farther up the road, Agnes stops at a red light at a new roundabout. On Lena’s left are lines of low flats, most windows lit by kitchens lamps, TVs or the azure glow of computer screens. Neon signs point to pizzerias, barbers and flower shops. At the top is the bright red logotype of a local pub. John’s home is a few corners away.

Lena and Agnes drive onto a parking lot framed by three interconnected buildings. Four other cars are parked nearby, all of them covered in snow. No sign of recent arrivals.

Lena checks the address she has scribbled down on a note. “Number nine,” she says to herself and looks up. “First floor.”

She spots the entrance in the corner. Going by the look of the block, there are two flats on each floor, each with two windows facing the parking lot. The two windows on the left on the first floor are dark, and the blinds

are pulled down. The windows on the right are lit. She can make out people inside: two adults and two or more children, all with Asian complexions.

John's flat has to be the dark one. On foot, he has not had time to get here, and the snow looks undisturbed. She reaches for her radio.

"This is Franke," she calls. "Petersen and I are outside the home of John Andersson, wanted for questioning in regards to a shooting earlier tonight." When her report is acknowledged, she stuffs her radio in her pocket, braces herself for the wind, and leaves the car.

Shielding her face, Agnes walks up to Lena. "I've called the locksmith," she says. "He should be here any minute. His office is up in Vällingby."

They wait with their shoulders hunched and hands shoved deep in their pockets. The wind builds up strength on the flat meadows around Grimsta and is channelled by the buildings into frosty streams, rocking traffic lights and shaking trees.

At least the air is crisp, all dust and fumes wiped away by the storm. Lena inhales until the cold burns her lungs. Maybe it will help her to concentrate.

"I heard the forecast," Agnes says. Her voice is muffled; only her eyes and nose are visible over her scarf. "There's more snow on the way. Stronger winds, too." She rubs her gloves together and looks at Lena. "Can I tell you something?"

Lena's throat tightens. They have worked together too long for tentative questions like this. Besides, Agnes usually handles conversations like pointer dogs treat quarry. This hesitation is a bad sign.

Then again, it was a matter of time before Agnes heard the stories.

"I'm listening," Lena says, forcing her voice to stay steady. "It's a personal question, I suppose?"

"Not really a question." A smile flashes on Agnes's face. "It's something I've been wanting to say for some time."

"Uh-oh." Lena manages a bravado smile while she prepares her usual explanation.

"I'm glad they teamed us up."

"What?" Lena breathes out and looks at Agnes in surprise. That was not what she expected.

"I've learned so much from you during these months," Agnes continues. "And I'm still learning. You're a good mentor. I was nervous when I came

to the force, because I know what some officers think of being burdened with a graduate. But you don't look down on me. You're professional, and kind."

"I'm – of course I don't." Lena stares at the parked cars and wonders what to say; the compliments have shot straight through her guard. In truth, Agnes is the one who is professional, while Lena is a paranoid, absent-minded wreck.

"As far as I'm concerned," Lena says at last, "you're as good as anyone else." She winces. "I meant that as a compliment. I'm no good at giving out praise. It's one of the reasons people say I'm prickly."

"They said that about me too," Agnes says.

"You can't be serious."

"I had a nickname back at the police college."

"Really?"

"'Miss Tetchy.'"

Lena scoffs. "Not very original," she says and blinks as a snowflake finds its way into her eye.

"I argued with a lecturer once. That's all it took. He started using the name, and it stuck."

"That's ridiculous." Lena takes a deep breath. "You must've heard some of the monikers they have for me."

Agnes hesitates and shakes her head, but she is too late. When she realises that Lena has seen her flinch, her lips tighten.

"A few," Agnes admits. "But I don't listen to what they say. People talk. In any case, what I've heard doesn't matter."

Lena finds that hard to believe. "Tell me what you've heard," she says. "I don't care much, but it's good to stamp out lies."

"They don't matter," Agnes says and faces her squarely. "Not at all. It's no one's business."

Lena opens her mouth to tell Agnes that it is everyone's business, but pauses. She expected Agnes to look wary or at least guarded, but she seems concerned, her eyes intent, searching and wondering.

Lena starts to backtrack. "What exactly is it that doesn't matter?"

"Whom you live with."

"Come again?" Lena asks. "I'm hopelessly single. That's no secret."

"I mean whom you'd prefer to live with, if you weren't single."

“How could–” Lena stops and chuckles. This is new, but not entirely unexpected. “Hold on,” she says. “They say I’m gay now?”

“Some do,” Agnes confirms. “As you’d expect, it’s mostly the nervous ones.”Lena sighs. Her workouts are a way to hone and regroup her thoughts: only during a hard session, lost on adrenaline tides and with the iron bar in her hands, can she shed her everyday ghosts and think freely. But it seems eighteen months in her basement lifting weights to get some peace of mind has turned her into a threat. And she is working with people who are supposed to shine at guesswork.

“As far as I can tell,” Lena says. “I’m straight as a ruler. Or at least a measuring tape. It’s very simple; I just haven’t been seeing anyone lately. There hasn’t been time.”

Although time has little to do with her solitude.

In the wake of her career is a series of brief and collapsed relationships. More than two years have gone by since her most recent affair. She would love to think that she is not the problem, however the power of self-deception is only so mighty. All her partners had signalled their looming departures with variations on *I know your work is important to you* followed by a ‘but’.

And that had been before she had taken up the weightlifting to keep her sane. Before the sleepless nights and the memories that came back to her at the worst of times.

“Right.” Agnes looks away and smiles into the blizzard. “I understand. I’m sorry.”

Lena can tell that Agnes does not believe her*;* the officer’s smile is strained. For some reason, it is also strangely secretive.

“And,” Lena adds, “just like you said, it’s totally irrelevant. Each to her own. Look, our man is here.”

A red van with a large yellow key on its roof drives onto the parking lot. Lena waves, and the car parks close to where they stand. A young man in a red company jacket and a yellow cap steps out and slams the door shut. In his hand is a large toolbox. Young and tired, eager to get home.

Together they trudge through the snow to the block’s front door. Lena scans her note, punches in the code, shoves the door open and pauses on the doorstep in surprise. Stairwells usually smell of disinfectants, damp and

cold stone; this one is warm and thick with the scent of flowers. She switches on the light and blinks.

Flowerpots in a multitude of colours stand on every step in the curving stairs. On the first landing are two large plants with large, lush green leaves. Lena touches a radiator inside the door and snatches her hand back. It is scorching hot.

Agnes takes off her gloves and looks around. “It’s a greenhouse in here.”

“Sure is.” The locksmith nods and scratches his neck. “Where to?”

“First floor,” Lena says.

On the first landing are two doors. One reads *Wau-Pong*, the other *Andersson*. As Lena suspected, it is the flat with the dark windows. No peephole, decorations or special features on the door. Only a sticker reading *No Junk Mail Please*. Agnes rings the doorbell, and a stifled buzz sounds from inside the flat.

Lena flexes her fingers and tries to imagine the inside of the flat. Despite having done dozens of similar searches before, the sense of brutal intrusion is the same every time: they are about to trespass into someone else’s territory.

John should not have been able to get here yet, and it would be an idiotic decision to run home, but there is always the possibility that she is wrong. Perhaps he has his gun trained on the door right now, waiting for it to be opened. The locksmith is experienced; he stands away from the door, out of a likely line of fire.

No one opens the door. Agnes rings again while Lena quickly peers through the thin mailbox. No light or movement. She lowers her mouth to the mailbox. “Police,” she calls. “Open up.”

Still no reaction from inside. She nods to the locksmith, who puts down his toolbox, opens the lid, and takes out an electric lock pick, a black, slim instrument that looks to Lena like a reciprocating saw.

The locksmith gestures at the door. “It’s a standard lock. Shouldn’t take long to crack.”

“Okay,” Lena replies, then spins around as the door opposite John’s flat opens.

A man in his late thirties leans out. Asian complexion, shaved head, black jeans and football shirt. A boy in diapers clings to one of his legs.

Toys are strewn around on the floor behind them. The smell of spicy meat and ginger blends with the scents of the flowers in the stairwell.

"Excuse me," the man says. "Looking for John?" The boy looks up at his father, who ruffles his son's hair.

"We'd like to talk to him," Lena said. "Have you seen him recently?"

The man nods. "This morning."

"Do you know where he went?"

When the man hesitates, Agnes produces her identity card. He looks at it, frowns, then turns to the boy and says something in a language Lena does not understand. When the boy has walked back to the kitchen, he turns back to Lena.

"Is he in trouble?" he asks.

"Please answer the question," Lena says.

The man sighs. "I don't know where he is. He's seeing someone, but I have no idea where she lives. I've met her a few times. Blonde woman, his age. She said hello to me once."

"Do you know John well?"

"Fairly well, yes." The man shrugs. "He keeps to himself, but he's been over for coffee a few times. He's picked up my children from the childcare centre when I've been stuck in queues."

"I see." Lena unzips her jacket; the humid stairwell is making her sweat. "Is there anything you could tell us to help us find John?"

The man looks pained. "Is it about the radiators?"

Lena and Agnes share a glance. "No," Lena says. "But now that you've mentioned them, please tell me about them." She wonders if John deals in stolen goods, or if 'radiators' is slang for something else.

"John tweaked them," the man explains. "For the flowers."

"What?" Lena asks.

"He made them hotter; otherwise the cold would kill the flowers. In summer, he changes them back to normal. They're his hobby. I like them too, and the landlord's okay with them. But I told him he'd get in trouble if he tinkered with the plumbing."

"These are John's flowers?" Lena asks. "All of them?"

The man nods. "He waters them nearly every day. Well, nights. He works late shifts."

“I see,” Lena says. “And no, we wouldn’t be here because he’s tampered with the plumbing.”

She hands the man her card and wonders what kind of advertisement agency did night shifts. In her experience, people in that business hung around vodka bars and cafés with menus in Italian.

“Let me know if you see John again,” she says, “or if you think of something else that can help us.”

“I will.” He nods and closes the door.

Lena looks at John’s door and at the flowers around her. They had been nursed by a man in love. A man who smiled a lot and looked after his neighbours’ kids. Now that man was running without shoes through the snow, gone along with footage of a probable killer.

A murderer whose face perhaps only John knows.

“What do you want to do?” Agnes asks.

“We’ve got the warrant,” Lena says, “so we’re taking a look inside. I need to get the bead on John. Find some clue as to where he is, what he’ll do, and who he is.”

Or was, she adds quietly to herself.

The lock clicks open.

“Done,” the locksmith says. “All yours.”

*

John

Snow on the rails is slowing the train to a crawl, making the two-minute journey take more than ten. Next stop is Stora Mossen, near a high school, a handful of flats, and a busy roundabout.

The three men exchange glances again: this is the ideal location. It is unlikely that there will be any security staff, and outside the station are dozens of unlit bicycle paths, parkways and paths. They can clear the stairs or jump the fence if they end up chased. After that, the storm will hide them.

When the speakers announce the upcoming station, John does not stir. After a few seconds, the train stops and opens the doors, venting the warm air into the night.

The men spring into action.

Their routine is rehearsed to perfection. Each man knows his role. The outcome is inevitable and unconditional; only the tools and the size of the targets change. The rush, though, is always fresh, always worth the risk.

The largest of the three men stands up and bars the passage between the groups of seats. At the end of the train car, there is only one way to guard, so he opens his jacket to block the view and pretends to search a pocket. No one looks at him or his friends. Everyone is lost in his or her phone, bent over a free newspaper, or drifting off to sleep.

The ginger man and his tall comrade move in on John, low and fast.

Pinning John’s arm to the wall with his knee, the ginger man flashes his knife in John’s face and then holds it to John’s stomach. Its tip pokes a hole in John’s shirt. The other man grabs John’s jacket, flips it open and reaches for the wad of notes.

“Don’t fucking move,” the ginger man hisses. His voice is quiet and confident.

“Stop.” John’s eyes open, and he clutches his money.

“What the fuck?” The ginger man who holds the knife stares at John. “Let go, or I’ll gut you. I’ll fucking do it.” He presses the knife deeper. “Let go of the cash, you fuckwit. Are you slow?”

Unbeknownst to each other, the three men share a collective thought: this is not right. They have skidded off the road of routine and swerved out into the dark woods.

"Hurry up," hisses the man who is blocking the corridor.

"Don't," John says. "You can't. Not yet." He holds on to his jacket while the ginger man tries to dislodge John's hand.

"What the fuck's wrong with you?" the ginger man growls. "Do you have a death wish? Do you *want* me to fuck you up?"

"I don't want to die," John answers, "but I need the money."

"This is bullshit," the black-haired man spits. "Cut him. Slice him open. *Come on.*"

The ginger man hesitates. "Man, I don't know. They've got cameras in here–"

"His fingers," the dark man says. "Cut them off."

"*Will you get a fucking move on?*" The man who bars the corridor slams his hand into the wall in frustration. "The doors are closing."

"Hold them open," shouts the dark-haired man. There is no longer any point in trying to be discreet; this has already gone all kinds of wrong.

He snatches the knife from the ginger man, slashes at John's hand once, twice. The two gashes make a deep cross on John's hand. Blood jets away and paints patterns on clothes and seats.

John still holds on to the money. He tilts his head and studies the dark-haired man's eyes, as if measuring him up.

The ginger man shakes his head and pulls at his friend. "He's stoned," he screams. "Fuck him. Let's go."

The train car shakes as the doors begin to close, but the man on lookout moves between them and holds them open. "Fucking hell," he moans. "*Let's go.*"

The dark-haired man stabs at John's hand again, but a moment before the blade hits, John lets go of his jacket and flings it sideways, making the knife go through empty air.

"What the–" The attacker loses his balance, stumbles backwards and falls down on his back.

The car shakes again. Its speakers rasp, and the voice of the irritated driver booms throughout the train as she instructs all passengers to move

away from the doors. Startled shouts come from farther down the car; people stand up and back away from the fight.

The large man and his ginger friend look at each other. They are at a breaking point: Their prey is irrational, and there is no time left. It is a matter of moments before someone calls the police.

As one, the two men run out and away, fleeing the train and the easy-hit-turned-disaster. The doors shut, and the train leaves the platform.

Left behind inside the train, the man with the knife is on his back as he wrestles John. Blood seeps through his clothes; he can feel its warmth against his skin. His jacket is ruined. His pants are stained beyond salvation. And he is alone, abandoned by his so-called mates.

But he has his knife, and in his other hand is the money, finally torn away from John's grip. Two fistfuls of power and possibilities. Now only to disable the crazed junkie and escape.

Teeth clenched, he wriggles out of John's hold, gets up onto his knees, and strikes again, aiming for the centre of John's abdomen. For a moment, it seems as if his aim is true, then John's foot shoots up and smacks into the man's groin.

Red suns burst in the dark-haired man's head. He sucks in air with a keening sound as nausea explodes in him, starting in his crotch and welling out into his limbs. All strength leaves him within the space of a second.

He falls onto his back between the groups of seats, in full view of the surveillance cameras. Only sheer pain makes him hold on to the knife and the money. When he manages to open his eyes, he stares down the length of another knife.

John holds the point of his knife millimetres from the man's face. Blood oozes between John's clenched fingers, and he uses both hands to keep the knife steady.

The man is bewildered but still furious. "Man, you're–"

John stamps hard on the man's arm until the man's knife clatters to the floor.

"Drop the money," John says when his opponent has stopped screaming.

"You're screwed," the dark-haired man wheezes and laughs hysterically. "When the train stops, I'm gone, and I'm keeping the money. *You're* the one holding the knife, you fucking idiot." He nods at the ceiling, implying the hidden CCTV camera.

For a long moment, John looks at the camera behind its protective plastic cover.

“That’s right,” the man says and grins. “What do you think they’ll see? You with a knife. It’s called armed assault. Now back the fuck away.”

John turns back to the man and moves the point of his knife to the man’s nostril, then pushes the knife up the man’s nose a full three centimetres. Before the man has time to scream, John rips the knife up and away, slicing open the entire length of the man’s nose.

Blood rises like a fine mist and rains over the man’s face, clogging his eyes and flooding his mouth. The man gives up a panicked, gurgling shriek. John slides the tip of the knife into the man’s other nostril and holds it there.

Searching the man’s pockets, John finds a mobile phone in chrome and a leather wallet. He holds each item in front of the man’s wild eyes, making sure the man understands the implications.

I have your name. I have your number. I have your friends’ numbers.

“I repeat,” John says, “let go of my money.”

Howling in pain, the dark-haired man clings to the bloodied stack of notes as if they were a rope that could pull him out of his terror.

John leans closer until his lips touch the man’s ear, and while the train slows down, he describes what he will do with the knife unless the man releases the money. The man wails, and the money falls from his shaking hand.

Finally, the train stops. John takes the money, the phone and the wallet, and runs out.

The other passengers who had retreated to the other end of the car rush out and back away from John. Parents carrying their children jog towards the exits. Men and women shout at their phones to make themselves heard over the wind and those around them: *Yes, a fight. On the train. I think someone’s dead.*

John looks along the tracks. They continue onto a soaring bridge that connects the suburbs with the city. He hefts his bag, jumps down onto the tracks, and steps over the live rail to reach the maintenance walkway wedged between the rail and a thirty-metre drop down to the frozen strait. Two fences on each side provide a handhold.

John enters the walkway and runs up on the bridge, towards the city.

*

John

The cavern’s domed ceiling is almost lost in darkness, but the glow from Miriam’s lantern is enough to illuminate the barrier that cuts the cavern in half. John slowly walks closer while the frost stings his feet.

It could be a natural rock wall, running across the cave and reaching up almost halfway to the ceiling, but as his eyes adjust, details start to emerge. First lines, shadows within shadows, then curves and hard corners. Slowly, the geometry grows into familiar shapes.

“No,” John whispers, his arms hanging slack along his sides.

A row of rectangles turns out to be three windows, each divided into six smaller panes. In the middle of the wall is a large double door with metal doorknobs and small circular windows. Above the door is a huge clock.

Staring, he takes a cautious step closer. He cannot see the colour of the wall, but he knows it will be made of red bricks, battered from a thousand thrown pebbles. The window frames will be white, their paint worn and flaking. Years of bare hands and mittens will have polished the fake brass doorknobs down to a silvery hue. Above the door, right under the clock, will be a bell the size of a dinner plate.

The building is his old junior school.

He peers at the clock in black-painted steel. The second hand is missing, just as it always had been. As a child, he used to think the teachers removed it to hide the fact that time sometimes really stood still.

Some details are wrong: colours are too pale, the windows too tall and the door too small. What is right, however, is the threat radiating from the building, the invisible menace of never-ending days and rough shoves.

John sits down, ignoring the chill that burns through his jeans; it is warmer here than it had been on the frozen lake, but not much. He looks down, away, blinks hard, rubs at his eyes, and opens them again. The school is still there. It is waiting, its dark windows staring back at him. The building is both forbidding and summoning, and the conflicting impressions are nauseating.

"No," he says again. "This can't be." Tears run down his cheeks, and soon he racks with hard, sharp sobs. He has gone insane. This is all the proof he needs.

Miriam sits down next to him and puts her arm around his shoulders. "If it's any comfort," she says, "this is the hardest part."

"What – part?" John manages to ask when his crying abates.

"Acceptance." She holds him closer. "The watershed room. Here is where you begin again."

"It's my damn school." John wipes tears off his cheeks. "Right over there. But it can't be, because it's not *here*. It's in a suburb, outside. I remember that much." He stares at the school, hoping it will sink back into the shadows. Being lost is better; this way, his madness is a tangible horror rubbed in his face. "I'm losing my mind," he says quietly. "Maybe I already have."

She looks at him sideways with a warm smile. "No, sweetheart. You're getting your mind back."

"What?"

"Think. What happened at your old school that was so important? Not just all the formative years, but something more special. An insight or an activity that stood out."

He searches what is left of his mind, if only to distract himself, and does his best to rack his brain for an answer.

And just like that, the memory returns.

It had not been an occurrence or a space of time, but an interest. In school, his need to escape the endless hours, the concrete and the clockwork regularity had turned him inwards, seeking for a way to vent himself. He had found it in the magic of shapes and colours.

"Art," he says.

"Are you sure?"

“Absolutely.” He has no memories of the experience beyond his certainty. A glance at the school and its clock cements the idea. He had loved art. Years of routines and repetition had pressed down on him until, one glorious day in his early teens, his psyche had found an emergency exit in pictures and drawings.

“What kind?” Miriam asks. “Clay, plaster, crayons?”

“I’m a painter.” John had meant to say ‘artist’, but the other word had sprung to his mind, and he knew it was true. Before finding himself here, at some other point in time, he had been painting. Hues and tints calmed him and revealed secrets. Now that he knows the answer to Miriam’s question, the urge to paint hovers there again, like a trapdoor beyond his reach.

“Perfect.” Miriam licks her lips, a nervous tic that John finds both oddly familiar and strangely attractive. “I knew the penny would finally drop through your creative cranium.” Again, she looks over her shoulder.

John looks at the tunnel from where they have come. No sign of anyone else, no sounds apart from a faint wind, but the sense of a closing presence is strong. He is reminded of the sticky, prickling heat that heralds thunderstorms, only here the air is cold and clings to him, stripping him of warmth.

“I want to get out of here.” Shivering hard, John looks around one last time in hope of another door, but finds nothing. “Looks like the school is the only way onward.”

“It is,” she says, but she does not move. “That’s your first journey. Past the thresholds, across the breaking point. The moment when you learned how to breathe. But the reason you’re here also wants you to stay. It is banking on your cowardice delaying you until it catches up.”

John tries to focus. He wonders if he, in fact, is somewhere else, tied to a hospital bed in the real world or lying unconscious in a ditch, dreaming while those around him watch his comatose body. Perhaps his body is trembling with a fever that is projecting these horrific images on the screen of his mind.

Yet he knows the truth does not matter. He might be lost in a fantasy, but he is present and aware. And at risk.

“What’s at the top?” he asks. “A way out?”

“It’s a path back to the captain’s seat,” she says. “A road to the rickety director’s chair.” She taps her head with her finger.

“You mean back to me?” he asks.

She nods.

“That’s crazy. I’m here.”

“Only bits and pieces of you. The rest is on the move, and it’s got a plan. And that’s a problem, John. A very big problem.”

He is about to tell her to make sense when he hears a distant sound, like a long, frustrated exhalation. “Did you hear that?”

“Unless it’s your subconscious telling you to hurry up,” Miriam says, “I don’t want to know.” She tugs at his sleeve. “Please, open the door.”

“Hush.” He gazes at the school, up at the ceiling, and back down the tunnel. Only darkness. “I swear I heard a sound,” he says. “A kind of *whoosh*.”

He turns around and takes a step back.

Emerging from the tunnel are tendrils of dirty smoke, thin translucent strips that creep rather than drift over the ground. The smoke stops, as if hesitating, and spreads out, leaving patches of frost on the stone underneath.

Transfixed, John watches the smoke slither towards him, a carpet of cold and filthy fog, almost invisible against the dark rock. A thin wisp rises, squirming and writhing. *Sniffing,* John thinks. *Tasting the air. Searching.*

“What the hell is this?” he breathes.

As he speaks, the fog jerks towards him and moves faster, snake-like. He backs up until his back touches the impossible school and stumbles forward again. There is nowhere to hide or run. Nowhere except through the school’s doors.

“John?” Miriam says in a panicked voice. “You have to go on. Now.”

“What the hell is this?” John moves sideways, and the smoke follows. The tunnel from where they came is lost behind a pallid cloud. A bitter, numbing cold radiates from the mist.

“It hasn’t taken form yet.” Miriam presses herself into a corner and tries to scale the wall back-first. “That’ll come later, when you’re closer to the exit.”

“Form?” he asks. The air is cooling fast; his lungs hurt with every breath. “What kind of form?”

“Just *go*.”

The smoke is almost upon John. He edges sideways and puts himself between Miriam and the advancing fog, but before he can move out of the way, the smoke whips across the ground and lashes out towards his legs.

He cries out in surprise, then again in horror when a tendril winds itself around his ankle. When he drags his foot back, the smoke falls away with a hiss, leaving behind the shredded remains of his trouser leg. The textile looks as if mauled by a pack of savage dogs. A furious wail rises from farther away, gaining in strength until it fills his head.

John leaps to the side and grasps the doorknob. The metal is worn and cool in his hand. It is just as he remembers it, even though he has no recollection of opening these doors. In the corner of his eyes, he sees the smoke rise, towering like a wave about to break on a shore.

He swings the door open and finds only blackness. It can be a wall or deep space, but it cannot be worse than the freezing, sentient fog that lurches for him. He has to get out. That is all that matters and almost all he knows.

Hoping that Miriam too finds a way to escape the fog, John throws himself through the doorway.

*

Lena

The locksmith tucks away his tools with practised speed and wipes sweat from his face. Lena hands him a card for him to forward to his manager. He takes it, nods, heads down the stairs and out into the blizzard.

Lena moves to the side of the door and motions for Agnes to be ready to open it, then reaches for the small torch in her belt clip. The torch is shorter and not much thicker than her thumb, but it is enough to illuminate most rooms.

She runs her tongue over her teeth, forms her fingers around the grip of her gun, and grits her teeth. Memories spring to her mind quicker than she can push them away.

Sirens, shouts, and dark, fleshy holes. The stink of sanitizers. Amplified pleas, screamed accusations, crying children. Flashes of bright orange. The gun, jolting like an animal in her hands.

“Lena?” Agnes looks at her and frowns. “Are you all right?”

“Wait,” Lena says. “I thought I heard something.”

She hates lying, and she knows she does not do it well, but Agnes does not look suspicious. Then she does hear a sound from inside the flat: two rapid thuds, muted but still distinct. They sound like footsteps. Agnes’s eyes widen.

“I’ll call for backup,” Agnes says and reaches for her radio.

“No.” Lena shakes her head. “We can’t wait. He might jump through a window, and we won’t spot him in this weather.”

So much for her hopes that John would not be around. It could be a friend, but that was unlikely. She pulls the pistol free from its holster and glances down at the weapon. Its weight outside the shooting range always surprises her.

A colleague had once told her he thought of his weapon as an extension of his hand. Another officer had claimed his gun felt like an unreliable lump of steel and plastic, prone to break down at the worst of times.

She disagrees with both ideas. To her, the gun is a catalyst, amplifying whispers to roars. She feels it right then: Submerged under concentration

and schedules, that honey-sweet urge stirs and reaches out, loosening the reins on her conscience.

“Now,” Lena says.

Agnes nods and opens the door.

Lena’s torch reveals a cramped hall, part of a small kitchen on her right, and a larger room ahead. She holds her gun parallel to the beam of light. Agnes switches on her torch, forcing the shadows back.

There is no sound or movement, but the noise came from inside these rooms. She peers at the silhouettes of furniture, the walls, the shadows. Someone is hiding in there.

“Police,” Lena calls out. “We’re coming in. Put your hands on your head and stay still.” She breathes out and swallows. The air is thick with the scent of oil and chemicals.

Once they move past the doorway, they can see most of the flat. Hall, kitchen, a tiny bathroom and a single living room. The small kitchen allows for only one person at a time. The cupboards are the size of bar fridges. No hiding spaces in there.

The bathroom door is wide open. She takes a quick step inside and checks the bathtub. Empty. Only one room remains.

Lena and Agnes turn to the living room and pause in the doorway.

There is no one in the room, but its walls are covered with paintings. Most are the size of regular papers, some are several square metres, others are small as postcards. Stacks of canvases and cardboards lean against the wall and lay in knee-high piles. Drawings and sketches are heaped around the floor. Along the right-hand wall is a table littered with brushes, tubes of oil colour and bottles of acrylic paint. Wooden rulers and sharpened charcoal sticks jut out from teacups in different sizes.

Some of the paintings portray people, alone or in groups, wandering among looming cityscapes or huddled in open fields and mountain ranges under wide skies. Others depict open landscapes, horses, mansions and gardens. Many of the smaller paintings are detailed renderings of small objects: flowers and lush trees, intricate symbols and trinkets, candlestick holders and ornate lamps. Art is not Lena’s strong point, but many of the paintings look photorealistic. She assumes John made them.

“Huh,” Lena says and edges into the room. She must have imagined the noise.

On the opposite wall is a window, its drawn blinds turned into a glowing grey square by the street lights outside. Below the window is a bed covered partially by a blanket. Next to the bed is a three-way spotlight floor lamp, and beside that two IKEA sideboards.

On Lena's right is an easel with a large unpainted canvas. No TV, no sofa, no couch. A bedside alarm clock blinks midnight in bright red to the soundtrack of its radio spitting soft static. She sweeps her light over the cluttered walls; the light switch has to be somewhere.

The sheets move.

Lena whips her torch back to the bed. Something under the blanket. Too small for a man. A child, perhaps. An infant.

Before Lena has more time to reflect on what is hiding in the bed, Agnes walks across the room and lifts the corner of the blanket. A cat peeks out, hisses and shows off its tiny fangs before retreating deeper under the blanket.

Lena exhales. "There's our bump in the dark," she says. "Let's get some light in here." For the second time that day, she longs to be back in the blizzard; her hands are so clammy she can barely hold on to her pistol.

Agnes finds a dimmer control behind an easel. As a soft light fills the room, she holsters her gun and unzips her jacket. "Are you looking for something specific?" she asks.

"Anything that might point to where he is." Lena brushes a tangle of hair from her face. Someday soon, she promises herself, she will get a navy cut. "Notebooks, postcards, envelopes with different addresses."

"Would he hide in a place where we're bound to look?"

"Possibly," Lena says. "He's scared, and he's cold. I wonder why the clock is reset?" The noise of static is grating on her concentration, so she walks over to the bedside clock and turns the power off.

"Maybe there's been a blackout?" Agnes suggests.

Lena nods absently and leans close to some of the smaller paintings to study them. A young woman carrying a large key and walking down a dark tunnel. An open silver locket holding a tuft of blonde hair. Something that looks like a black Rubik's Cube. All three paintings are as small as pocketbooks and so meticulously painted they look almost lifelike.

"He's good," Lena says quietly.

"What?" Agnes looks up from the table.

“At painting. He knows this stuff.”

“He works for an advertisement company. Maybe it’s part of his job.”

Lena grimaces. “Perhaps.”

“But you don’t think so.”

“How often do you see paintings in ads?” Lena asks.

“Good point.”

“Work or hobby, this place is absolutely crammed.” Lena gestures at the room. “Let’s have a look around. I’ll call the animal welfare people about the cat.”

Agnes nods, glances down, and frowns momentarily before she turns to search the room. Lena looks down and realizes she is still holding her gun. She shoves the weapon back in its holster, snaps the security strip in place, and investigates the desk.

She soon finds an order in the chaos. The mess is the kind of untidiness that stems from inspiration, not disinterest in cleaning: a continual wake of disorder behind someone with an idea in sight. Or perhaps she sees patterns because she wants to be there. It would not be the first time. Shivering, she thinks of her own chaotic flat.

Her phone rings. The office. She takes the call. “Franke.”

“This is Wiknell from the information department. I have the mobile phone records you requested. They’re for a man called John Andersson.”

“Go on.” Lena parts the blinds and peers at the parking lot. No one there.

“There’s only one company, but lots of matching calls. I’ll email the list.”

“Anything that stands out?”

“Not really. Most calls were made evenings, all within the past three months.”

“When’s the latest call?”

“This afternoon, just after two o’clock.”

“Right.” She looks at a painting of clouded sky, layer upon layer of deep grey and blue. “I’ve got to go.”

She ends the call, turns to Agnes and briefs her. As Agnes scribbles in her small, leather-bound notebook, Lena watches the woman’s concentrated face and wonders if Agnes takes notes when watching the morning weather forecast.

Once Agnes is done, she returns to checking the drawers. “Clothes and paints,” she calls over her shoulder to Lena. “Some papers, mostly bills. Blue overalls.” Agnes holds them close to her face. “Smells funny. Paint, I think.”

Agnes turns to searching the kitchen while Lena gets down on one knee and looks under the table. Underneath the tabletop is a pet cage with a tattered toy mouse stuck through the fenced door. Next to the cage are rows of paint bottles, spray cans, a folded rug, and two large plastic bottles of solvent.

Behind the bottles is a phone cord nailed along the skirting board. She follows the cord to the plug and finds a plain red telephone behind an empty canvas.

“I found the phone,” Lena says, “but there’s no modem.” She hears Agnes rummaging through cupboards, lifting plates and moving packets around.

“He might use a neighbour’s connection,” Agnes replies from the kitchen. “Or a mobile phone. Useful if you’re doing something illegal. Hard to trace.”

Agnes comes back from the kitchen and shakes her head. “Nothing in there. What do you want to do now?”

Lena runs her thumb along the edge of the canvas on the easel. “We’ll go back to the station. I’ll brief Gren, and I’ll make sure the warrant’s been forwarded to other stations. And to the underground security companies, too.” Looking at the canvas, she notices the motif and takes a step back.

“I’ll be damned,” she says under her breath. “Look at this.” She takes a step back to let Agnes get a better view.

The portrait depicts a woman in a deep green dress. Sitting next to a blossoming tree on a hill, she looks wistful and at peace, her face turned to a setting sun outside the frame. Her hands are resting in the tall billowing grass around the base of the tree.

In the background are mountain tops, grey waves blending with an equally ashen sky. Some way away from the tree, the ground seems to end, as if the grass hides a vertical cliff. The scene is both vast and detailed.

“It’s her,” Agnes says quietly. “Isn’t it?”

“I think so,” Lena replies. She saw the same face less than an hour before, though then it was only a shell, void of anything resembling life. In

this painting, caught in thick oil and precise brush strokes, Molly looks fully alive. The grass appears to wait for a gust of wind to caress it. She cannot make out the woman's expression, but she seems to be smiling.

Lena's radio beeps. She pulls back from the canvas and answers.

"Franke here."

"This is Nordström from patrol one. We've just completed a third sweep of the area."

"Any sign of John Andersson?"

"No, but he's definitely out there. People have seen him down by the station. Although the station's security is absolutely sure that he hasn't passed through the turnstiles. We also have a confirmed sighting from the owner of a corner shop near the crime scene, but the man said you've already talked to him. And there are some others who say they've seen him, too."

"Who?"

"A few people around the station. Commuters and retail staff. One man saw John use a nearby cash machine. The most definite statement is by a woman who works at the gas station near the roundabout."

"I think I know which gas station you mean. What did she say?"

"John bought shoes and a lot of chocolate bars. The woman said he looked at her in a creepy way. Not dirty, but weird."

"Do they have any cameras?" Lena asks.

"Yes, but they don't record anything."

Lena looks at the ceiling, closes her eyes, and exhales hard in frustration.

"So John didn't catch a train," she says, summing it up to herself. "Instead he bought shoes, withdrew money, and went back to the scene to buy a computer."

"It seems so. But there's another thing."

The coil of worry in Lena's stomach stirs. "Go on."

"There's a strong possibility that another man ran from the flat. Or one more, that is. Not just John Andersson."

"Proceed." Lena opens her eyes. She had been right: this was not a case of a boyfriend gone off the rails. It was more complicated and could soon become far worse.

“Many disagreed on the victim’s neighbour’s description of how John was dressed. We compared our notes, and like I said, it’s likely that there’s another man involved. He wore a grey sweater, had dark hair and was unshaved. Black trainers and blue trousers. Maybe a bag or a backpack. Some witnesses say the first suspect also had a bag. It’s confused, I know.”

“How sure are you that the second man is part of this?” Lena asks. “Have people seen him near the victim’s flat?”

“Yes. A woman walking her baby even saw him leave the building. Running as if he was on fire, she said.”

“In the same direction as John Andersson.”

“Correct.”

“Any trace of him?” Lena looks at Agnes, who is talking to someone on her own radio.

“He got to the train station and then disappeared. Just like John, really. He could’ve made it onto a train, for all we know. Security don’t remember seeing him.”

“Get the footage from the station,” Lena says. “We know roughly when he was there.”

“We’ll try.”

“Don’t try, just – look, we need that fucking image, understood? I’m going to the station now. Out.”

Lena thrusts her radio back into her pocket before she loses her temper completely. She can tell by a glance at Agnes’s face that Agnes has bad news.

“What?” Lena asks.

“There’s been an assault on the underground,” Agnes says. “At Alvik. That’s only three stops from Abrahamsberg.”

“What happened?”

“Someone attacked a passenger with a knife.”

“That doesn’t have to be related to John,” Lena says. “Molly’s murderer has a gun.”

“It’s unclear what happened, but the description of one of the men sounds vaguely like John.”

“Oh.” Lena runs her hands through her hair and tries to think. Neither man would want to get into a fight; both of them would hope to stay unnoticed, out of sight and mind. “Is anyone in custody?” she asks.

Agnes shakes her head. “So far, only the underground security is on the scene, but two police patrols are on their way. Do you want to go there?”

Still holding her hair back, Lena sighs. She wants to run to her car, speed to the scene, and get to the bottom of what is going on. At the same time, she needs to ensure they get the footage of the mysterious second man. The tangled leads pull and spin her in different directions. And instead of following up on either lead, she must run a briefing at the police headquarters.

“We’re going back to the station,” Lena says and walks out of the room.

Agnes pockets her notepad and follows Lena out into the stairwell. “I overheard some of what you said on the radio,” she says. “Are we looking for the wrong man?”

“I don’t know. At any rate, we have two suspects: John Andersson and the man who ran from the flat just before him.”

They shut the door, seal it with a strip of crime scene tape, and leave the humid stairwell for the biting winter night. Moments later, Lena’s car swerves out onto the road. Agnes’s car follows close behind.

Agnes calls just as Lena clears the roundabout.

“Could the other man have been someone she saw on the side?” Agnes asks.

“I’ve thought about it,” Lena admits and winces as a cloud of snow eclipses her sight of the road. “But do you remember the wine glasses and the candle in the kitchen?”

“Sure.”

“If I were cheating on my partner, I wouldn’t do so next to a window. She planned to eat with John. Only someone else came knocking first.”

She stares down the tunnel of churning snow, checks her speedometer, and forces herself to slow down. Crashing now would see her lose hours, and she was already too far behind her quarry.

“Then what’s John doing?” she asks. “Why is he running?”

The traffic lights ahead turn yellow, and Lena shoots across the intersection just as the lights turn red.

“I’m not so sure he’s running,” Lena says. “I’m starting to think he’s doing the opposite. The shopkeeper near Molly’s place believes the same.”

“Oh, God.” Agnes is silent for a few seconds. “What do we do now?”

“I need to think. We’ll talk at the station.”

*

John

The door slams shut behind John as soon as he enters the school. Breathing hard, he stands still and looks around. He had tried to prepare himself for what could hide behind the doors: another frozen lake, deep pits or more of the terrifying smoke.

What he had not expected was more caves.

Miriam's lantern shines through the windows behind him and allows him to make out the jagged ceiling. It stretches into the darkness, but it also arches down. Somewhere ahead it would seal the grotto into a subterranean dome. Under his feet, the coarse rock is coated with a layer of frost. At least there is no sign of the horrid smoke in here. He hopes Miriam managed to get away too.

He turns around to walk up to the window and stops in mid-step.

The school's façade is fake. All its features, the bricks, the clock and the texture of cement, are painted on a gigantic canvas propped up by diagonal timber planks. Walking closer, he makes out crooked nails, wooden splinters and knotholes in the wood that supports the enormous screen.

A new word flicks through his mind: *Theatre.* The exterior belongs on a stage. On the other side should be an audience, and the school would be an elaborate backdrop.

"Why here?" he asks himself. "And why this?"

A glow shines through a window and is followed by the smudged image of Miriam's face. She holds up her lantern next to her head and squints into the darkness, looking for John.

"Hello?" she shouts. "Are you all right? The smoke is gone."

John exhales with relief; Miriam is on the other side of the impossible window, but at least she is safe.

"I'm fine," John calls back.

"Can you open the door?" Miriam asks.

John pushes at the door but it does not budge. “It’s stuck,” he says. “But there’s nothing here on this side. Just more cave.”

“Are you sure?”

“I think so, although I can’t see very far. Oh, and the wall’s fake. It’s a stage prop. Just as crazy as everything else,” he adds more quietly.

“You used to smoke,” Miriam says after a moment. “Have you checked your pockets?”

“I used to what – hang on.” He pats his trousers and feels a small hard object in his left pocket. A cigarette lighter. He knows it wasn’t there a moment ago, yet at the same time, he has a feeling that it has been there a long time, or at least used to be.

I will wake up soon, he thinks. *Any minute now.*

He takes the lighter out, flicks the lid, and flinches at the reek of gasoline. After a few tries, an orange flame rises from the wick. Real or not, he is thankful; the darkness is almost as bad as the smoke that had chased him.

“Voilà,” Miriam says. “You have to go on now. I’ll join you again as soon as I can. I promise. After all, it can’t expect you to do this on your own.”

“Please hurry,” he says. The idea of walking alone terrifies him.

“Remember this,” Miriam calls through the window. “To break out, you’ll have to win battles you’ve won before. Also, the answer will be right in front of you. The way they often are.”

She smiles at him through the smudged window, but her concern is evident: Miriam is as afraid as he is.

John nods, turns away, and walks deeper into the cave, holding his lighter high in the air. The lighter illuminates a small island so faint he risks walking straight into a wall. The echoes of his steps return as the sound of scurrying beetles.

“Madness,” he whispers into the silence.

He walks on, nervously testing the ground before him. By now he should have found the opposite wall. At some point, the base of the dome-shaped ceiling must meet the ground, but the cave keeps surrounding him with the pressure of immensity.

Soon the lighter gets so hot he can barely hold it. His eyes ache from peering into the dark around him. Still nothing. Only blackness. He stops, rubs his face with his free hand, then looks up and stumbles back in surprise.

In front of him is a pale white square, hanging face-high on a wall he had not seen. Slowly, he approaches it, prepared for more devilish surprises. The square is as wide as his arms spread wide, and its borders look soft and uneven, as if lined with cotton or foam. A freezing cold radiates from it.

Walking closer still, he realizes that the brilliant white surface is broken up by glittering fragments of crystal white. Some of the fragments are falling off the square's lower edge and land softly on the ground at John's feet. He leans close to the square and sniffs. It smells of winter and, more faintly, chemicals.

As he pulls back, a thud comes from the square. Another thud follows, then a distant shout. More sounds follow, coming from behind the powdery square.

Moving closer again, he hears voices: incoherent babbling and quiet murmurs, loud sighs and a muffled cough. He sweeps at the white substance; then he brings his fingers into the light of the cigarette lighter.

It is snow. The white panel is a block of ice with voices inside.

"Come on," John mumbles. "Make sense."

He brushes away more snow and pulls his fingers back when they touch a hard surface. When nothing jumps out to attack him, he reaches out gingerly and prods the surface. Perfectly smooth, like glass or ice.

He keeps on brushing and sees movements in the surface, faint shadows stirring within the material, shifting and blending. The voices become more distinct, but they are too hushed for him to make out any words. Soon the shadows grow sharper and more substantial. Colours emerge, first blurred, then separating and crystallising into shapes. A ceiling and a floor. Walls and objects.

And people.

Weak with confusion, he stares at the square as the image solidifies. A large room with green and beige walls, lit by bright strip

lights in the ceiling. On the floor are wide drawers and white shelves lined with folders. In one end of the room is a rectangular desk, in the other a large circle of easels with huge canvases.

Standing by the easels are children in their early teens, perhaps even younger. They work on their paintings while they whisper, moan and sigh.

John recognizes them. He could tick off every person before him: The chatting beauty. The quiet one. The alpha male. The fidgeting, brainy girl. The nervous prankster boy. The freckled athlete. A dozen more, all of them wearing faces two decades old. He knows them all. And they would know him. The room had been in his old school, and he had been inside it many times.

“It can’t be,” he breathes. The hairs on his arms stand upright.

In a moment of overwhelming vertigo, he presses his face to the surface and scans the room for his own face, but he is not there. Shuddering, he breathes out, then shouts in surprise when a boy’s face appears on the other side.

The boy stares at John. Twelve or thirteen years old, narrow chin, blond curls. A kind, soft face. A name floats around the boy’s features. *Fred?* Close, but not right. *Fredrik.*

Frowning, the boy motions for John to come closer, looks over his shoulder, and moves his hands down, out of John’s sight.

John takes a cautious step forward, then leaps back again when the surface slides upwards and vanishes. In its place is a wooden window frame.

“Are you crazy?” the boy wheezes. He keeps his hands in the air, as if holding up a window that could come crashing down. “Get back in before Lennart sees you. He’ll be at your easel soon.”

John’s tongue is stuck to the roof of his mouth. He catches a glimpse of an adult teacher at the far end of the classroom. The sight brushes against more memories, but this time the sensation is that of stirring a nest of snakes. These recollections are faint and unwilling to become clearer, and he is happy to leave them alone.

Fredrik looks at John and grimaces. “Stop being weird,” he urges. “Come on, hop in.”

“*I’m* weird?” John asks, unable to think of anything else to say.

The boy pulls a face. “You’re the one out in the cold. We’re in here. What do you think?”

“I think I’m losing my mind.”

“Better hurry up in here and catch it, then. The window’s heavy. You can’t hold it much longer.”

John looks up at the boy’s hands. “But you’re the one holding it up.”

“You nutter.” Fredrik laughs. “In or out. What’s it going to be?”

John clenches and unclenches his fists. There are no other passages from the cave. He has to go on, through whatever door he can. Reaching out, he waves his hand in the space beyond the window, inside the room. The air is almost as cold as outside where he stands.

John puts one foot on the ledge, heaves himself up, and stumbles into the classroom.

*

John

The steam of John’s breaths trail behind him as he runs over the bridge.

The strait below, frozen solid for weeks, is a wrinkled field covered by wisps of snow sailing over the dunes like clouds. Two trains pass him, but no passengers look at him except a boy who presses his face against the window. A police car heading in the other direction swishes past, sirens baying. In front of him is Stockholm city, a glittering mound behind the curtain of snow.

He passes the crest of the bridge and continues down. Far ahead at the next station are the tail lights of a train. Just before the station, the bridge touches land, and the railing is flanked by fences and barbed wire. Near the station is a door in the fence that leads out to a street.

He slows down and walks up to the door. It is locked with a large padlock, shielded from rain by a cover of brushed steel. John lowers his bag to the ground, takes out his keys, selects one and opens the lock. Once outside, he shuts the door and looks around.

Kristineberg, a suburb-cum-part-of-the-city, is a cluster of tall blocks of flats divided by a long park and the underground rail. Most buildings are huddled close together, their forties-era fronts overlooking the strait below. Wedged in between the blocks are rows of streets that run towards a high-rise.

Normally a busy area, tonight there a few in sight. A man pulling a reluctant dog. Farther away, a group of people carrying plastic bags full of clinking bottles. On his left, a couple marching hand in hand towards the station, their heads bent against the wind.

John chooses one of the streets and runs up the incline. In the distance are sirens calling from the depth of the storm. He runs faster, past parties, closed shops, and snowed-in cars, past music, laughter, coughs and cries. He crosses a street, turns a corner and stops, resting with his hands on his knees.

The sirens are coming closer. Around another corner are a few concrete steps that lead down to a brown metal door leading to a windowless basement. A sign on the door reads *Argenti Advertising*.

John unlocks the door with his keys, shuts it behind him, and locks it again. Strip lights splutter in the ceiling and light up the room.

The basement holds racks with leftover posters, shelves stacked with cans of glue, boxes full of solvents, rollers, sticky tape, cutters, and a pair of large halogen torches. On his left is the door to a small bathroom. In a corner stand three aluminium ladders.

Along a wall, jackets and caps are draped over a row of hooks. Facing him is a large cracked mirror. In another corner are piles of blue overalls. Green plastic bins brim with cigarette packets and polystyrene cups. Unwashed coffee cups line a metal sink, next to a bench with an old filter coffee brewer. A rusted bicycle leans against one wall.

In a corner is a desk teeming with Post-it notes, cheap pens, worn folders and phone books. Next to the desk are a grey office chair and a double-door metal cabinet locked by a small padlock. John chooses a key from his key ring and opens the lock.

The cabinet is packed with equipment. On the lower shelves, toolboxes and batteries stand side by side between rows of headlights for helmets and walkie-talkies. On the top shelf, next to a tangle of computer cables, is an inkjet printer.

John puts the printer on the desk, sweeps away a layer of dust, and plugs in the power cord. He turns the printer on and places a stack of schedules upside down in the paper tray. The printer hums and whirrs, and stops. A red light blinks on its front.

John rummages among the cables, selects one and connects it to the printer. He takes out the laptop and, after a few tries, connects the other end of the cable to the computer, and switches it on. When the computer has booted up, he sits down on the chair and browses the files on its hard drive.

After nearly twenty minutes, he pauses at an image of a running man who is facing the camera. The image is small, but the quality is good. A lean, pale man, perhaps thirty years old. His face is a mask of stress. Thick stubble, dark hair, blue eyes. In his right ear is a small ring. John prints the image and puts it on the desk.

There is a knock on the door.

John slips one of the image into a plastic folder and puts the folder in his bag.

Another knock, this time long and insistent.

He rises from the chair, takes one of the knives from his bag, stands next to the door, and flicks the light switch. Darkness fills the room.

A key rasps in the door's lock, and the door swings open. Pale street lights illuminate the snowflakes blown inside. Hesitantly, a man steps into the room and stamps hard on the floor to shake the snow off his boots.

"Anyone here?" the man asks as he fiddles with a dark cylinder in his hand.

Standing at an angle behind the man, John moves forward with the knife held low, but his planned strike misses as the beam of a flashlight explodes in his face.

The man who has entered staggers backwards with a choked scream. John trips over a toolbox and slams back-first into the ladders, which topple and fall down around him with piercing bangs.

As John pushes the ladders away and rises up, the strip lights come back on.

"John?" The man with the torch leans against the opposite wall. "It's me, Nils. I almost had a heart attack, for God's sake. Didn't you recognize me?"

"I thought someone was trying to break in," John says. "I'm so sorry. Are you all right?"

"You nearly scared me to death," Nils says and laughs nervously. "Why weren't the lights on?"

"I wanted to hide. I guess I panicked a little." John makes a sheepish grimace and shrugs.

"You're paranoid, mate." Nils peers at John. "Actually, you look terrible. Have you slept at all lately? And is that blood on your face?"

"It's gouache," John says. "I've been up all night painting."

"What about your hands?" Nils asks, noticing the gash on John's hand.

"I slipped with a knife back home. It looks much worse than it is. I'm going to clean it up in a bit."

"If you say so," Nils says, sounding unconvinced. "Are you working tonight? I thought you were off to see your girlfriend."

"I'll see her later. There's something I need to fix first."

"Well, lucky you." Nils shakes his head. "I've got shifts the whole weekend, and the tunnels are fucking freezing. I'm just going to grab a few

batteries, then I’m off. As soon as I get my breath back,” he adds with a forced laugh.

Nils sits down in the office chair with a heavy thump and points at the computer. “Is that yours?”

John nods. “I’m printing a birthday card for my girlfriend.”

“On this?” Nils taps the printer. “I’m surprised it works. It’s as old as my son.” A ringtone beeps from his pocket. He checks the screen and rolls his eyes.

“It’s the boss,” he says. “Probably thinks I’m in a pub.” Sighing, he takes the call.

John turns away and pretends to examine his damaged jacket while he watches Nils in the mirror.

“No, I’m at Kristineberg,” Nils says to the person on the other end of the conversation. “My torch gave up. I’ll be at the site in fifteen minutes. What?” He frowns and presses his phone to his ear. “Yes, I have. Why?”

Behind Nils’s back, John takes a step closer to Nils.

“Oh,” Nils says. He scratches at his neck and swallows. “Look, can I call you back in a few minutes? The reception’s bad in here.”

Slowly, John crouches down and reaches for a toolbox next to his feet.

*

Lena

Lena scoops up water from the sink, splashes it over her face, and gasps; the water is chilled from travelling through near-frozen pipes. She is alone in the bathroom. Her only company is the odour of disinfectants, the humming pipes, and the wind rattling windows coated with frost.

She looks up at her reflection in the mirror. Her eyes are bloodshot, her skin pasty. Her thoughts are constantly derailed by flashbacks bobbing to the surface of her consciousness. Molly's flat, John's paintings, the shopkeeper's concerned look. The wine glasses and the burning candle. Forgetting to put away her gun.

She has to find these men. Before she cracks, she will catch a killer and stop another man from becoming one. The missions will be the glue that keeps her together a little longer.

But the reports from the underground station at Alvik have complicated an already tangled mess. A knife fight, a bloodied train car, and more confused statements. On the plus side were definite sightings of John, but he had disappeared again, most likely running over the bridge and into the city.

She looks at her mobile phone. Twenty past eight. Agnes and Gren will be waiting for her to head the briefing. Shaking her head, she grabs her notes and leaves the bathroom.

The seventies still cling to the police headquarters' veneer doors and carpeted floors. Most walls are painted an immaculate non-colour, as if the painter had been unable to choose between yellow and orange and settled for a compromise that defies words. Over time, grey linoleum had replaced some of the carpets, large maps of the city had given way to LCD screens, and the *taptaptap* of typewriters had changed to the soft plastic whisper of keyboards.

But the past lingers like a lecturing spirit: *work harder, act faster, be smarter*. Forty years of hard thought, night shifts, and desperate puzzling left marks that faded slowly. The less time she has to spend in the oppressive corridors, the better.

She walks past rooms filled with discussions, ringing phones, radio calls and news broadcasts. Pausing at a vending machine outside the room, she chooses between two varieties of sandwiches she does not want, picks the cheapest, and enters the meeting room.

A dozen officers sit around a rectangular table, their faces cast in blue and white by a ceiling-mounted projector. On a wall are flickering images of John's driver's licence photo and a dot-point list of facts. Three small windows frame the night outside. The room smells of strong coffee and hot plastic. Everyone is silent.

Gren stands at the far back, a white folder in hand, his face in deep shadow. Agnes is waiting just inside the door.

Lena is thankful for the half-gloom as everyone turns to look at her; the spotlight is not her favourite location. Someone must coordinate and sum up the ongoing investigation, but she would rather get back to work.

"Any news before we start?" Lena asks the room.

Gren clears his throat and shakes his head. "Nothing since you came back."

"Right." Lena walks to the end of the table. As she passes the water cooler, she reaches out to turn it off, but someone has already done so.

Agnes catches Lena's eye and nods once, almost imperceptibly.

Frowning, Lena winces in the light from the projector. She tries to remember if she has ever told Agnes that she hates the sound the water cooler makes, but she is sure she never has.

Lena clears her throat. "As you all know by now, we're looking for two men. The person for whom we put out the first warrant is John Peter Andersson."

She points to the wall behind her where an image of John is projected. "He's forty-two years old and lives in Grimsta, a small suburb west of the city. Unmarried, no criminal record. His employer is a company called Argenti Advertising. We've left a message with their manager and asked him to report back if he hears from John."

"Does he have any family?" an officer asks.

"None living," Lena answers. "His parents have passed away. No siblings."

She changes the image. "This is a copy of the attendance record at John's high school," she continues. "It seems John went to counselling, but

the counsellor's journals have been archived, so I have nothing that explains why he went there. Seeing a counsellor hardly makes John an exception, but I still want to know why he did."

"I'm quite sure those records still exist," Gren says. "They're probably kept in some department. Almost definitely as actual papers, although we should be able to get hold of them quickly if the right office is staffed."

"See if you can get them," Lena says to Agnes, who makes a note on her phone.

"What was John's relation to the victim?" Gren asks.

"I'm getting there." Lena sifts through her notes. "John's believed to have been the victim's partner for some time. We initially thought he was involved in the murder, but there's nothing specific that ties him to it. I take it we haven't found the weapon yet?" She looks up at an officer, who shakes his head.

"We have prints from John," Lena continues, "and the victim. I requested another sweep, and the lab's working on some partial prints they've found."

Lena walks over to the laptop that controls the projector, taps with her finger on the screen, and waits for the software to load. She resists the urge to shake the slow computer. Every second that passes is another moment for John to go deeper or run farther. Or closer.

When a map replaces the projected photo on the wall, Lena zooms in on the western suburbs.

"John has done a number of unusual moves since he was sighted at the scene," she says. "Soon after the murder, he withdrew money from a cash machine at Brommaplan." She points at coloured areas and dotted lines that illustrate John's supposed route. "He left his shoes behind in the flat, probably to avoid leaving tracks. His car was parked outside. He probably realised that he wouldn't have made it far in the blizzard."

"The bank says he got as much cash as he could in a single day," she continues. "He went on to buy shoes and chocolate bars from a gas station at Brommaplan. After that, he returned to the corner shop across the street from the scene and bought a second-hand computer from the owner."

"A computer?" an officer asks.

"Yes," Lena says. "After that, we think he ran to another station, probably Abrahamsberg, where he got on a train. One stop later, he gets in a

fight. Again, the statements on what happened are all over the place, but we're pretty sure it's him. One of the involved men matches the description of John, and the timing is right. Three other people were part of the fight too, one of which were wounded. There was blood in the train car. Lots of blood."

"Was it the suspect's?" an officer asks.

"We're not sure. From what I've been told, the surveillance camera filmed John holding the knife and fighting someone else, and apparently it looks as if John is stabbing the other man in his face. I haven't seen the tape, but I will soon. And we're going to match the blood with DNA samples from the shoes."

"After that," Lena continues, "John climbed down onto the tracks and ran over the bridge, towards the city. A passenger on a passing train reported seeing a man on the maintenance track. That's the last sighting we can link to John. What else have we got?"

An officer at the back waves a paper. "I've talked to the tax authorities. His record is spotless, but we found that John owns another property. A house in Drottningholm. It's about fifteen minutes from Brommaplan by car when it isn't rush hour. Or a blizzard."

"Drottningholm?" Another officer turns to look at the paper. "That's an expensive address. And his other place is a tiny flat in Grimsta?"

"The property in Drottningholm isn't big," says the officer who holds the paper. "I looked it up. It's a family property. The land's worth a lot, but the house is old and small."

"I want to have a look," Lena says. "Has any patrol been out there yet?"

The officer shakes his head. "It'd take forever to reach the place," he says. "The ploughs are focussing on busier areas. I'm sure the main road in the district is cleared, but from there, it must be at least an hour's walk. And that's without the snow. Right now, it'd take half the night to trudge there."

Lena pinches the bridge of her nose. "We still need to see it. Gren?"

"I'll put in a request for a helicopter," Gren says. "Don't expect miracles, though. They're needed everywhere right now. And that's those that are cleared for flight in this weather."

"I see," Lena says. "That's not in the direction John was heading, though. Unless he doubled back." Lena pauses. "But I don't think he did."

"Why not?" Gren asks.

Lena looks at him and braces herself. “He’s got an agenda,” she says. “Food, money, and the computer. It sounds random, but it’s not random enough. John Andersson has a plan.”

This is the critical part: she needs to let them work through the options and exclude dead ends. If she simply states her idea that John has turned into an avenger, her reputation is going to trigger denial and immediate scepticism. Logic is no match for brute cynicism.

Gren puts his palms together in thought and looks at Lena. “What has the computer got to do with this?” he asks. “Do you know why he bought it?”

“I think so,” Lena replies. “It’s got footage from the corner shop’s surveillance cam.”

“You think John is trying to cover his tracks?” Gren asks.

Lena shakes her head. “He risked too much for that by going back.”

“Unless he’s panicked and isn’t thinking clearly,” Gren suggests.

“Unlikely,” Lena replies. “The shopkeeper said John was calm and composed.”

Gren gestures with his papers. “Then what’s your theory?”

Lena flexes her hands. The projector glares at her like an interrogator’s light. “The camera is mounted outside the shop. It caught John, but it might have filmed the other man, too.”

Gren pauses, then curses and sits back in his chair. “You think John is going after him,” he says after a moment.

“Yes.”

A moment passes while the notion sinks in. Heads turn, looks are exchanged. A murmur rises. Someone sighs. An officer curses. Lena holds her trembling hands behind her back to hide them; if she is right, John is heading down a dark path. And she will follow him.

Lena’s phone buzzes. When she sees the number from the police’s laboratory, she takes the call.

“Tell me you have what I need?” she asks.

“Hello to you too,” says a man in a deep, tired voice. The caller is Liam Swan, a young and ambitious forensic who works too late and smokes too much. “I’m calling to let you know we’ve pieced together a set of prints from the front door of the victim’s flat. They were made very recently.”

“Were there any matches in the database?” Lena asks.

“Oh yes,” Swan says.

Lena suppresses a relieved sigh. At bloody last.

“I’ll put you on loudspeaker,” she says. “We’re in the middle of the brief. I’m hanging up, so call back on this number.” She runs through the number twice and ends the call just as the man on the other end starts to speak.

Across the room, Agnes’s phone rings. Agnes checks the phone, looks at Lena, mouths a word Lena does not catch, and then slips out of the room.

The speakers beep. Lena pushes a button, and the sound of the lab technician clearing his throat booms in the stifled room. Lena lowers the volume.

“We can hear you,” she says. “Proceed.”

“As I was about to say before I was cut off, we ran the new set through the scanner and have a positive match. Niklas Petterson, born 1971 in Sala, just outside of Stockholm. He’s got a long criminal record. I’ll read you a summary. The rest is in the email.”

“Go on,” Lena says.

“Thirteen cases of assault, nine cases of robbery, two of which were armed. He was taken in for a botched-up burglary when he was fourteen. After that, he’s been picked up five times for possession of marijuana and amphetamine. He’s done two years for grievous bodily harm, another two for three robberies.”

The technician clears his throat. “There’s also charges of possession of guns, knives, axes, and tear gas. Explosives, too. He was released from prison a year ago. His current address is unknown, but most previous arrests took place west of the city.”

Lena closes her eyes. An armed, brutal psychopath junkie, a furious, devastated man on his tail, and she was hunting both. The confined space of the room is smothering her. She wants to walk away, run out into the storm to breathe, clear her head and think. Her hands shake so much she can barely hold on to her papers.

“Thank you,” Gren says to the technician. “That’s very valuable.”

Lena’s eyes shoot open. “Yes, thank you,” she echoes. “Let me know if you find anything else.”

The call ends with a click. Lena switches the projector off and turns on the lights. Eyes blink in the sudden pearl-white glow.

“I want to search the area around the foot of the bridge,” she says. “Starting with Kristineberg and its adjacent stations,” she says. “Two patrols, more if any are available.”

“Not very likely on Friday night,” a man murmurs. Two other officers nod.

Lena wants to throw her papers at all of them. They do not need two patrols; they need twenty, a hundred, a regiment. They should have an army of volunteers. They need to search every square metre of the city until they find John, because there is no telling what he will do next, only that it will be bad.

“We might get lucky,” Lena says. “I need one more patrol to start looking around Brommaplan for Niklas. I don’t think he’s there, but we might find people who know him, or at least about him. Check with the security companies and make sure they get the photos. I’ll sort out the new warrant as soon as we’re done here.”

Lena pauses. “If anyone finds him,” she continues, “be careful. That goes for both men. As you heard, Niklas has an ugly history and may have access to weapons. As for John, just be prepared.”

Agnes waves at Lena from the doorway.

“Yes?” Lena asks.

“I had a call from John’s manager. He’s tried to get hold of John but only got to talk to his voicemail, so he called around to his team and started asking questions.”

Lena slaps the table with her notes. “But for fuck’s sake,” she shouts. “That’s exactly what I told him not to do. He’ll scare John into hiding.”

“I think he got worried,” Agnes says. “But there’s something else.”

“What?” Lena feels the adrenaline trickle into her blood. With luck, this is the lead she is hoping for.

“The manager has just talked to one of his staff,” Agnes says. “A man who was in one of their storage depots. The manager said that the conversation was odd.”

“Odd how?” Lena asks.

“According to the manager, the man sounded strange. And the man in question said he’d call the manager back.”

“Did he?” Lena asks.

“No. And now that man’s phone is switched off.”

A detail picks at Lena’s attention. “Agnes, you said ‘depot’. I thought John worked for an advertisement agency?”

“He does, of a sorts. I looked them up just before the meeting. They put up underground advertisements. Those big posters at the stations.”

Lena’s mouth goes dry. *Of course*. The van. That jacket. The night shifts.

“Do you know if John’s got keys to the underground network?” Lena asks. “That would be a nightmare.” At any rate, John knows the tunnels inside out, including a hundred places where one could hide and stay hidden.

“I’ll find out.” Agnes reaches for her phone again.

“Where is this depot?” Lena asks.

“Kristineberg,” Agnes says. “I’ve got the address.”

“That’s John,” Lena says and snatches up her jacket. “It’s too close to Alvik to be a coincidence.” The trickle of adrenaline grows into a stream.

“I’ll arrange backup,” Gren calls after Lena as she runs out the door. “And Lena?” he shouts. “Call me. Keep me informed.”

*

John

John looks around the classroom in wonder.

A circle of easels holding small canvases take up most of the space. Boys and girls clad in blue vinyl aprons frown at their work while they dot and sweep with their brushes. Next to each easel is a small set of drawers brimming with wrinkled tubes and colours in plastic bottles. The air is heavy with thick oils, bitter acrylics and dry watercolours, underlain by dust and old plastic. In the ceiling are rows of pale, harsh strip lights.

Opposite the window through which he entered the room are shelves with folders, tattered books and rolled-up papers bound with string. On his left, in one end of the room, is a blackboard covered in scribble he cannot make out. In front of the blackboard stands a high podium in brown wood. A small desk lamp balances on the ledge of the stand.

There are no windows other than the one through which he has climbed. Strangely, there is no door either, although he is sure there should be one. One of the easels is unoccupied. John knows whose spot it is: the canvas is his, and it is waiting for him.

As he looks at the children, names and memories shoot through his mind too fast for him to grasp them. But he knows them. Even the whispers and the murmurs are familiar. A cold draft washes over him from the window behind him, and he turns around.

The cave outside the window is gone, replaced by his old school yard. Rusted basketball hoops, jungle gyms, wooden benches and naked trees growing out of the snow, precisely as he remembers them. Children in thick clothes mill around the area, shuffling restlessly, throwing snowballs or using their footprints to make giant letters in the snow. Water pouring onto the snow from a broken valve has created a track of polished ice, and the students take turns sliding into the grey haze that cloaks the far end of the school yard.

These children are his friends. Or they had been; they are all long gone, spread far and wide by the winds of adulthood, and they would have aged. But here they are before him, stomping through droves of snow. His old classmates, preserved in a copy of his old school, hidden behind a façade inside a cave that–

He presses his eyes shut and slowly opens them again, knowing that he must roll with what he sees. Otherwise his sanity, or whatever is left of it, will wither away in seconds. For now, he must pretend that this is real. Push on and up. That is all that matters.

Two girls in knitted hats walk past outside the window. One of them glances into the room, meets his eyes, and smiles. The girls whisper to each other, giggle behind their mittens, and walk on.

The girl who smiled is Miriam. Another Miriam, younger than the woman who guided him here. Impossible but undeniable. He is about to bang his fist on the window when someone behind him smacks him on the back of his head. Startled, John spins around.

“Stop it,” a thin, nervous boy with an Asian complexion hisses. “Get back to your easel. Lennart is pissed off today. Maybe he looked in a mirror.”

“I wish everyone would stop hitting me,” John mumbles and looks at the unused canvas. It is as white as starch, untouched and unblemished. Looking closer, he realises that the surface is impossibly flawless; its whiteness is more an idea of a hue than a possible texture.

The teacher is coming closer. John does not have to turn around to know; he feels the man’s presence like a stifling cloud. Sweat makes John’s clothes stick to his skin. Surprised, he looks down at his haggard clothes; he had not been this hot and uncomfortable a moment ago.

“You’ve got to draw something,” the boy whispers.

“Draw what?” John looks between his unused canvas and the teacher.

“Anything,” the boy urges. “Just something to keep him happy. A house or a table. You know what he wants.”

John’s memories crystallize and become clearer: This is how these classes had been. Draw something, make an effort, but never

excel. Do not shine or you will attract interest, and that was bad. You did not want Lennart's attention. Staying quiet means staying unhurt. Fear fills the room like a fog, but underneath it is another feeling. An importance, some undefined ambition, larger than everything else.

But while it definitely is his old classroom, some details are wrong. The canvases are too small, the brushes too frayed. The mist in the school yard is much too dense, and the air is thicker than it should be. And he is sure there should be a door in one of the walls. There had to be. The room itself feels sentient and evasive, as if it is trying to change whenever he does not look.

He glances at the easel next to him: Five white vertical lines on solid black. The girl – Sara, or Clara? – who is painting the lines looks sideways at him and makes a worried face. Her thin blonde hair is tied up in a messy bun, and her cheeks are flushed with uneasiness.

"I'm hopeless," she says, her voice hushed. "I couldn't make the lines bend even if I wanted to."

Unsure what to say, John turns back to his canvas. Lennart will be annoyed unless John makes an effort. And you do not want to annoy Lennart.

He takes a brush from the drawers and inspects its threadbare and crooked tip. It will not work; neat strokes require clean, undamaged brushes. This brush will leave muddled blotches and uneven lines. As he studies the worn tool, he senses a missing insight. Some form of knowledge gained but lost. But not permanently, the thought hovers close, just out of reach.

Shaking his head, he dips the brush in a pot of brown paint and draws a line. Lines are good; simple and plain. A beginning and an end, both clear in sight, under control. Different from everything else he knows.

A new line follows, then another. Soon the work envelops him in a calm that allows for reflection, and for the first time since the awakening on the ice, he can analyse what is going on, even question his own senses.

Impossibilities crowd his mind, so he deals with the most urgent.

Where the hell am I?

I have no idea, he thinks, answering his own question. *Dreaming. Insane. Dying. Trapped in someone's joke.*

The subject is a dead end. He dips the brush again and starts over.

How can Miriam be out in the school yard? She never followed me through the door.

If I'm mad, anything is possible. Maybe it's just someone who looked like her.

No. It's more. The hat, the mittens. The smile.

Maybe she found a way in.

So why didn't she say hi? She saw me.

The lines on the canvas multiply. Lost in thought, he adds black and grey, deepening shadows and soaking the texture in subtle layers. He pushes his brush hard into the canvas.

Why am I trying to make sense of this when everything else is chaos? Am I grasping for straws?

Why not? One straw, however frail and strange, would be nice.

Is Miriam that straw?

She is all I know. She is–

John clenches the brush so hard it almost breaks in half. He knows who Miriam is. He turns to go back to the window, to call her name, but his path is blocked by the teacher.

"What have we here?" Lennart asks in a cold voice.

*

John

Snow crunches under John’s shoes as he crosses the frozen strait.

A carpet of perfect white covers the metre-thick ice, temporarily bridging the fringe of the inner city with jetties along the suburban shorelines. John has swapped his old jacket for the one he took from the depot, crisp and clean, smelling of artificial lavender. His bag bounces against his back as he walks.

On his right, the strait broadens and splits to several frozen channels. On his left is the bridge, a looming arc behind the curtain of snow. The lights of the passing trains are too feeble to reach John. Even the street lights’ glow is too weak to illuminate the strait. Down here, he is invisible, veiled by the snow.

He heads for Alvik again, although he has no intention to enter any station again tonight. Walking is safer. The cameras in the train cars caught him bloodied and armed. People will be looking for him, hoping to snare him and lock him in. Question, secure, and restrain. He cannot allow that to happen yet.

The map in his mind dictates his course. The chain of events stretches on into the distance, but the next link is clear, and there is time. Morning is hours away.

John reaches the far side of the strait and enters the suburbs. He walks down empty walkways and roads, zigzags between roadwork machines and follows a path that curves up and west, around the blocks and away from Alvik.

His walk takes him past three underground stations surrounded by large houses and low blocks of flats in yellow brick. After he has left Alvik behind him, he follows the road towards Brommaplan.

Half an hour later, John reaches the gas station where he bought his shoes. The traffic has calmed; only the occasional car crawls past through the snow. Snowploughs rumble on nearby roads.

He continues to the bus stops near the underground train and looks around. A few commuters brave the weather and wait outside, but most stay

in the warmth of the station hall and rush to their buses as they emerge out of the blizzard. A police car is parked at an angle just outside the doors.

John's hands are numb. His face is stiff, his feet sluggish. He must find shelter for the night. Tomorrow the printed image will help him find his target, and then he needs to be alert, ready to use his last strength to reset the scales. All Molly's suffering will be visited upon the one who caused her pain. All her fear, hurt, and damage.

Keeping his face turned down, he crosses the area, walks past a hotel and continues in behind a row of shops that separate the residential blocks from traffic. Ploughs have pushed snow off the street and onto the sidewalk, leaving pedestrians with a slippery path littered with cigarette packs and dog faeces.

At the end of the street are the stairs he ran up and down earlier that night. He uses them again and soon trudges past the first red-brick flats of Abrahamsberg.

He pauses at the top and looks around. No ploughs have made their way here yet. Every street is buried in a knee-deep blanket of snow. Swells reach halfway up to roofs of cars parked along the sidewalks. Looking along the street, he makes sure no one is watching him, and lowers his heavy bag to the ground.

Inside it are several tools from the toolbox at the storage depot, including an electric drill, a short crowbar, a blowtorch, pliers, and screwdrivers. They will be useful, but they are heavy; carrying them this far has exhausted him.

Minutes pass while John stands still and waits.

A front door opens farther down the street. Yellow light spills out past a man in a grey coat, pausing on the doorstep to put on his gloves. The man looks up and walks out, shuffling through the snow, away from John. Behind him, the front door swings back, grating against sand and ice.

John grabs his bag and runs towards the door. A moment before it will close, he puts his hand in the gap and pulls the door open, then stumbles in and closes the door behind him.

He moves to the side and stands still, looking around and listening.

Narrow stairs curve up and down from the entrance landing. Pale green walls, lime green ceiling, black iron railings. Three storeys, two flats on each floor. The stairs leading down end at a basement door. Water hums in

pipes. The distant booms of a video game echo around him. Someone sneezes.

John unzips his bag, takes out his knife, and rams the hilt into the plastic light switch on the wall. The plastic splinters and clatters to the floor. He punches it again and shatters its circuits, then uses his feet to sweep the splinters down the stairs. No one will be able to switch the light on again tonight, and the shadows near the basement door are thick enough to hide him.

After a quick look out through the door to make sure there is no one outside, he walks down to the basement door, sits back in a corner, and sets the alarm on his wristwatch. It is time to rest and recover.

His next task will require all the strength he has.

*

Lena

When Agnes received the call about the depot, Lena and a dozen other officers raced the short distance from the headquarters to the location, a ten-minute journey that seemed to take hours. Police cars or not, drivers are slow to give way when the roads are coated in slick ice, but she had zipped past the crawling traffic and hoped oncoming cars would spot her in time.

Once they arrived, six patrol cars surrounded the depot to cut off all escape routes. Guns drawn, Lena and the officers left the cars and advanced up the streets, past windows full of open-mouthed people. Her mouth was dry and sour by the time she turned a corner and saw the closed metal door.

She had hoped John would be inside. She had pictured him giving up peacefully. No drama, no blood, no fight. But something, perhaps the complete stillness of the scene, told her they were too late again.

To her surprise, the door had been unlocked, and when the officers stormed in, their torches found Nils gagged and tied to an office chair. A strip of duct tape covered his eyes and mouth. Given how frantic Nils had been at that point, it was just as well he could not see the guns aimed at him.

They rushed Nils back to the headquarters and to the nurse in residence, a calm, elderly man who had dealt with the most unnerved people. Once Nils was deemed fit to be interviewed, Gren brought him to a small conference room near Lena’s office, where they wait for her to join them.

Lena hisses and snatches her hand back as the coffee machine spits its brew in all directions. The human race can build smart phones, perfect brain surgery and launch satellites, but it cannot create a machine that makes decent coffee, let alone one that aims the substitute straight into a cup.

She waits for the brown trickle to stop and takes the plastic cup. When she turns around, she sees Agnes walking quickly down the corridor.

“I just received a call from the national agency for education,” Agnes says. “They’ve found John’s school’s counselling files.”

“That fast?” Lena is surprised. “On a Friday night?”

“It seems they have a diligent intern doing serious overtime. He’s sorting through old archives and was happy to chase down the files we wanted. I think he appreciated the distraction.”

“Sum it up for me.” Lena knows it might be important. Rank bubbles of teenage sins often surface years later as darker acts.

“We got the contents of John’s folder by fax,” Agnes says. “I’ve only skimmed the files, so I may have missed details, but I think I’ve got the gist of John’s problems.”

“Uncontrollable behaviour?” Lena guesses.

Agnes shakes her head. “A teacher.”

“Did John abuse one of the staff?”

“Possibly,” Agnes replies. “John certainly wasn’t happy with him. But the counsellor’s documents included copies of more than three dozen complaints filed against John. Stubborn disobedience, upsetting the classroom, and so on.”

“Those records must have shown up in our registry?” Lena says. Having to dig up important information that should have been on her desk long ago was a perfect waste of time. She wonders what other secrets hide in John’s past.

“They would have,” Agnes says, “if the school had sent the reports on, but they sat on them. The agency for education had the files only because the school’s board was restructured years ago. It seems the school decided to hush the affair up.”

“They hid every report?” Lena asks. “That’s ridiculous, and also criminal. Which teachers complained?”

“I’ll get back to the man in the archives,” Agnes says. “Perhaps he’s willing to do some more research. There are more records from John’s school years. The head teacher’s journal, the school nurse, and so on.”

“He better be interested,” Lena says. “If he doesn’t comply, I’ll talk to him.”

“The information will be on paper and also confidential. Do you want him to send it over by courier?”

“As fast as he can.”

Agnes nods. “I’ll get to it as soon as I’ve checked up on the patrols.”

Lena nods, says goodbye to Agnes, and continues to the cramped, airless debriefing room where Gren and Nils, John Andersson’s colleague,

sit around a small square table. The light is turned down to a gloom that is meant to be soothing, but it is also unnerving; the shadows are much deeper than they have any right to be in a room this small.

Stifling a yawn, she places the drink on the table in front of Nils, who nods in thanks and sips before Lena can warn him the coffee is hot. Nils winces, gingerly puts the cup down, and gives in to a coughing fit. Gren steadies the cup while Nils regains his composure.

Lena sits down on a chair next to Nils. “Are you all right?”

Nils nods and wipes his mouth. “I’m fine. Really. It’s just – no, I’m okay.”

Lena looks at Gren, who raises his eyebrows at her. Nils is anything but okay.

Sitting shivering under an orange blanket, the man is almost physically unharmed. His only visible wounds are the bruises where cable ties have dug into his arms and legs, and the sore rectangle the duct tape over his mouth has left. But the unseen damage is much worse: shock has left Nils bewildered on a deep, primitive level. His face has a sickly, yellowish tint, and his eyes flicker around the room.

“There’s no rush,” Lena lies; John is already an ongoing disaster. She wants to be in her car, out on the streets and looking for him, no matter how futile her chances of finding him. Four cars – as many as the force can spare – are scouting for John, and another four patrols track the other man. It is all they have, and it is nowhere near enough.

Nils tells them what happened up until his manager called and then dwindles off. Lena knows why; Nils wants to say more, but the words will raise the spectre of what happened at the depot. He needs time to brace himself. Time they do not have.

Lena runs her hand through her hair and pulls it back from her face. All this guessing. What is John doing right now? Will she sleep tonight, and if she does, what will she dream?

When, and how, will this hunt end?

Gren smiles. “We understand that you’re ill at ease, but we need only a few more answers.”

“Can I go home once we’re done?” Nils asks.

“If you want to,” Gren says. “Otherwise, there’s a room here. The nurse will check up on you again as soon as we’re done. If you decide to leave,

we'll need your contact details."

Lena clears her throat, pushes a button on the panel on the table, and adjusts the angle of a small microphone next to the panel.

"Please tell us what happened after your boss called?" she asks. "Try to recall things John did or said that were out of character."

"Such as tying me to a chair?" Nils says. "That's pretty strange, isn't it?" His laugh comes out as a broken stutter.

"I mean more specific details," Lena says. "Especially anything that points to where John went next."

"I get it." Nils reaches for the coffee cup again but bangs his hand on the edge of the table. He grimaces, shifts in his chair, and rubs at his left hand.

"Well," he says, "when I was on the phone, I couldn't tell my boss that John was there, so I tried to stall. I planned to say the reception was bad and head outside. My boss was kind of cagey about why he wanted to know if I'd seen John, but I could tell from his tone that it was bad."

"Just as I was about to rise from the chair," Nils continues, "John slapped the phone from my hand down on the floor and stamped on it. Then he turned around and held a big damn knife to my face."

"Go on," Lena says.

"He told me to be quiet, or he'd cut one of my eyes out. I still can't believe he said that. We've worked together for five bloody years, and I never once thought he was a bloody psychopath."

"How did you respond?" Lena asks.

"I didn't say anything. I just gaped like an idiot."

"Do you think he would have hurt you?"

Nils stares at the coffee cup and nods. "John's voice was, I don't know. Not hoarse, but level. Completely flat. I should've known something was wrong, the way he acted when I first got there."

"This isn't something you expect to happen," Gren says. "What happened next?"

"John tied me to the chair with cable ties, tight as hell. I thought my arms would fall off. Then he slapped that tape over my eyes and mouth. I don't know for sure what happened after that," Nils says.

Lena looks at Nils's bruised arms. If Nils had been tied for a while longer, his arms would have been lost. John had almost turned his friend

into an amputee. She wonders if John had pulled the ties so tight by accident or design.

“You must have heard sounds,” Lena says.

“I was in a panic,” Nils says. “But I heard him use the computer. There were a couple of printed papers on the desk when I got there.”

Lena leans closer. “What was on them?” she asks. “This might be very important.”

“A man’s face,” Nils answers. “Pale, kind of gaunt. That’s all I saw. I had no reason to take a closer look.”

“Hair colour?” Lena urges. “Eyes? His age?”

Gren raises his hands a fraction, and Lena presses her lips together.

Nils shakes his head. “I’m sorry.”

“That’s all right,” Gren says. “Please continue.”

Nils takes a deep breath. “A minute or so later, I heard him pull a cable from the socket in the wall. He shuffled his bag around on the floor. Then I heard him search the toolbox. It took forever. I almost pissed myself; I thought he was going to torture me. You know, like in those movies.”

“Do you think John took any tools with him?” Lena asks.

Nils shrugs. “He might have put some of them in his bag.”

Lena studies the microphone on the table and wonders why John needs tools.

“And I heard the clink of bottles,” Nils continues. “Did you find my bag? There were two bottles of Lord Calvert in it. Whiskey.”

Nils and Gren look at Lena, who shakes her head. “John must have taken them,” she says.

“Oh,” Nils says. “Bastard.”

Lena taps her fingers on the table. If John gets drunk, he would be careless and easier to find, but that does not fit with her idea of his behaviour. He had taken the alcohol for some other reason. Perhaps for sterilizing a wound or to set something on fire.

“Did John sound or act stressed?” she asks.

Nils shakes his head. “Just disinterested. Bored, almost. But he never talked to me after he taped my eyes, except to say–” Nils falls silent and closes his eyes.

Lena and Gren look at each other. “What?” Lena urges.

“I can’t tell. Sorry. I just can’t.” Tears work their way out from behind Nils’s closed eyes.

Lena rephrases her question. “Was it about where he was going?” If it was, she has to know. There are no alternatives.

Nils shakes his head and rubs at his eyes. “He told me what he’d do if I called the police. But he won’t, right? I never called you.”

“We know you didn’t,” Gren assures him. “Did he threaten you?”

“Not me.” Nils pauses. “I have a son. He lives with his mother. My ex-wife.”

“He threatened your son?” Lena asks.

“Please,” Nils begs and looks at Lena. “You must protect him. Send police to the house, make sure John doesn’t get to him.”

“Of course,” Gren says, “but–”

Nils’s voice climbs to a hoarse scream. “John can’t harm him. He has no bloody reason now. You have to tell him. You have to let him know I *never called*.”

*

John

As John sees the teacher up close, the door to more memories opens a little wider.

Lennart had been his art teacher. Stooped and prematurely aged, always with stubble and a frown etched into his high forehead. His head was shaved with the level of perfection he demanded but never received from his students. Pale restless eyes, always moving but at the same time distant and withdrawn, never taking in a sight for longer than a moment.

But not everything is right: Lennart's wrists end in rounded stumps covered with scars. The man's hands should be there, but are not.

His breath is caught in his chest. John scans the room and realises that everyone is missing one or more parts of their bodies. Some lack a finger, some two, a few have only one hand while others, like Lennart, have no hands at all. The girl next to John holds her brush tight between her fingerless wrists as she dabs at her painting. She pokes her tongue out of the corner of her mouth in concentration.

The teacher steps up to John's easel and looks down at the painting.

John reels and turns back to the canvas, expecting a mass of nonsensical criss-crossing lines; while he painted, his thoughts had drifted back to Miriam, the school yard, the iced-over lake and the unseen horror that had resided there.

To his surprise, the lines, while smudged and blurred, form a distinct shape: An upright rectangle framed by shadows. Along its left side, near the edge of the canvas, is a narrow, vertical stretch of black. In the brown are hints of patterns. He makes out swirls in the hues, restless strokes that seem to shift as he watches them.

Underneath the colours, something else hovers, a feature detached from oil and shapes. A physical sensation, tangible and

within reach but at the same time formless. He raises his right hand to the painting and feels a weak breeze waft from the colours.

“Can you explain this?” Lennart’s tone is gentle, but a hush falls over the class.

“I’m not sure,” John says, his voice trembling. “Is it a box?”

“No, John. That is not a box.”

John looks for an exit, but there are still no doors, and the window is too far away. Being in Lennart’s presence makes John feel as if he is smoking a cigarette close to a barrel of petrol.

The girl next to John makes a startled sound. “I know what John has painted,” she says. “It’s a–”

Lennart turns slowly and looks at the girl.

She bites her lip and cowers. “I’m sorry.”

Lennart nods and turns back to John. “Well?”

“I have no idea,” John says, trying to keep his voice from shaking. “A tree? A cube? A square cup? You tell me.”

But he knows this is not the answer. He wants to raise his hand again to see if the wind is still there, but he can tell that Lennart will disapprove.

What does it matter? John asks himself. *Lennart is a shard of a dream. As real as fog, or at least as harmless. Out there, in the real world, I’m probably in a coma or bleeding to death under a car.*

“No, John.” Lennart shakes his head and scratches at his nose with the scarred skin of his stump. “It’s filth.”

“Filth?” John looks at the canvas. The silence in the room is absolute. “It’s a brown square and a bit of black. Doesn’t look like anything.”

“Perhaps it does not mean anything to someone else,” Lennart says softly but menacingly, “but it does to you. There’s an idea in there, simmering beneath the colours, hiding just under the surface. And it’s waiting to become clearer. Am I right?”

“I’m not sure about that,” John says, his voice breaking. While Lennart talks, John sees what he has painted, as if the teacher’s words bring the lines and angles into focus.

It is a door.

The perspective is skewed, the image flat and at the same time ajar. Beyond the illusion of a crack, he glimpses an empty, featureless space. No, not empty; the wind he felt comes from that dark place. He hopes Lennart does not notice the sweat breaking out on his brow.

Lennart purses his mouth. “Don’t worry. It’s not your fault. Your young mind leads you astray. It happens to all children.” He motions at the students behind him, who are doing their best to pretend they are not listening.

John nods, not sure what Lennart is hinting at. He wishes Miriam was here. Not the Miriam whom he has seen in the schoolyard, but the Miriam he left behind. The other students continue to look away, their mouths tight and their shoulder stiff.

“I have to fail this painting,” Lennart spits in disgust. “But you have plenty of time to work on another. After all, you’re not leaving any time soon.” He smiles. “I’ll be right back.” The teacher turns away and shuffles towards the podium.

“Lennart and his fucking pen,” a one-handed boy murmurs.

John looks at the girl next to him. “What’s going on?” he whispers.

The girl makes an apologetic face. “I hope Lennart won’t be nasty, but your painting’s good, John. He’ll mark it down real bad.”

John looks at the teacher, who rummages in a wooden box on the stand. “I wish I could go home,” John says.

“Home?” the girl asks.

“Wherever it is, it must be better than this. And it has to be warmer. Perhaps there are doors there, too.”

The girl says something in reply, but John does not hear it; the teacher is moving towards him again, step by slow step. Held between Lennart’s two stumped arms is a red-tipped marker pen.

“Don’t struggle,” the girl next to John whispers. “If you do, it’ll hurt more. There’s nothing you can do.”

“Hurt?” John asks. “It’s a pen. Right?” A chill covers his body as he watches Lennart advance.

“Hey,” the girl whispers. “Don’t worry. It doesn’t matter in the long run.” She makes a remorseful grimace while she continues to

draw circles with her brush held between the stumps of her arms. “We all end up the same.”

*

Lena

Lena slumps back in her chair. “There’s no reason to shout,” she mumbles while Agnes tries to calm Nils down.

“Can I go now?” Nils wipes away tears from his face. “I’ve got a headache. I want to make sure my son’s all right.”

“Absolutely.” Gren rises but motions for Lena to stay seated. “I’ll get the nurse. He’ll be here in a moment.”

A minute passes while Lena stares at visions far beyond the room’s walls. Tools. Threats. Torture. John on his way to the devil knows where, carrying a picture, a knife and whatever else he has in his bag.

The nurse arrives and leads Nils away. Gren waits outside until they are out of sight, then goes back into the room, closes the door, and sits down next to Lena. He crosses his arms and looks at her.

Lena meets his eyes and wonders if it is her turn to be debriefed.

“How are you holding up?” Gren asks.

Lena sighs. “Good,” she lies. “Tired and worried, but otherwise fine.”

Gren puts his fingertips on the edge of the table and nods. “I’m glad you’re doing all right. I’ve got my eyes on you.” He chuckles and shakes his head. “That came out wrong.”

Studying her commander, Lena wonders if his words had not been exactly what he meant. “You meant to say you’re looking after me?” she says. “I appreciate it.”

“You know I am.” He pauses. “This is a strange case.”

“Agreed.” Lena picks at a callus in her palm. She could kill for a session in the gym. “I should get back to my desk.”

Gren waves away her concern. “There’s nothing you can do right now.”

“There’s always something. You know that.”

“You’re pushing yourself too hard.”

“Look who’s talking–” Lena catches Gren’s look, breathes deep, and refocuses. “Sure. I’ll get some rest soon. I promise.”

“When?”

Lena scratches her nose. No other path is open to her except honesty. “When John is brought in,” she says. “We can only guess what he’ll do next.”

Their eyes meet in a moment’s silence.

“Will you be upset,” Gren asks, “if I tell you the department’s psychologist has advised me to make sure you don’t get too involved?”

Even though Lena is not surprised, she cannot resist making a disgusted face. She pictures them discussing her mental health. “No.” Lena sighs. “I won’t be upset.”

“We care about you. It’s that simple. Your accident wasn’t that long ago.” He clears his throat and pokes at some invisible dent in the table. This is why Lena respects Gren, at least most of the time: He knows when to shut up. It is a rare quality in anyone.

Lena decides to end the silence with a question. “Does she know?” She looks closely at Gren for any sign of a lie. She has wanted to ask this for a long time.

“Does who know what?” Gren asks and stops prodding at the table.

Lena lowers her voice. “Does Agnes know why we’re having this chat? Is she aware of why the psychologist is breathing down my neck?”

“Of course not. It’s classified.”

“I know, but Agnes’s a rookie. I thought maybe she’d been warned unofficially. I know there are rumours.”

Gren shrugs. “I certainly haven’t said anything, and I’d give anyone who did a hard time. Trust me on that.”

“Can I tell her?”

Gren looks troubled. “I can’t order you not to. Even if I thought that’d help.” He pauses. “Do you want to?”

“I’m not sure. Are we done here?”

Gren nods. “Take a break,” he says. “Get some rest. We’ll find the men. But not tonight.”

“You’re right.” Lena lowers her eyes. “I’m running on empty. We got no leads until a patrol comes up with one or we get the footage. Right?”

Gren nods again.

“Right,” she says. “I’ll be back at eight tomorrow. It’s only eleven thirty now. That’ll give me enough sleep.”

Gren smiles and stands up. “I’m glad you see my point.”

“It’s a shiny point. Hard to miss in the gloom.”

He rubs his back. “Two officers are at the victim’s flat to go over it thoroughly. If there’s anything that gives us a new lead, I’ll let you know straight away. It’s your case. But you must sleep. That’s an order.”

“I got it.”

“That’s all for now. The roads are getting worse by the minute. If this keeps up, you won’t be able to drive home.”

“I can sleep here.” In the corner of her eye, Lena sees Agnes outside the door, looking away.

Gren shakes his head. “All rest rooms are full. The few trains that are running are hours behind their schedules. We’re hosting officers from the whole city.”

“Ah.”

“So you better hurry while the roads are still open,” Gren says. “By the way, can Agnes ride with you? Her train’s delayed, and there’s no knowing if it’ll leave the Central Station at all. She lives not too far from your place, but I suppose you know that.”

Lena wants to slam her fist down on the table. There goes her last chance to dodge Gren’s request and get back to the suburb for another look at the flat. “Of course,” she says.

“Thank you.” Gren shuffles his papers into a neat stack. “See you tomorrow morning.”

When Lena walks out of the room, Agnes straightens up and brushes a stray hair from her face.

“Hi,” Agnes says. “Can I–”

“Let’s go,” Lena says.

“Oh. That’s great. Thanks.”

Agnes follows Lena towards the elevators. “I’ve heard back from our helpful intern at the Ministry of Education,” she says. “A car has picked up a boxful of paper for us. A removal box. Their office is nearby, so the papers will be here soon, despite this weather. Do you want me to wait here and have a look?”

“Absolutely not,” Lena says. “Call Gren and tell him to instruct someone here to start browsing. We want to know more about what kind of trouble John caused. And the names of the teachers who filed complaints about John.”

They arrive at the steel doors of the elevator. The scents of cold coffee and damp carpets fill the air. Agnes reads something on her phone while Lena watches the reflection of them both in the metal doors.

“I appreciate this, Lena. I just checked, and my train is still stuck.”

“Not a problem.” Lena stifles a yawn. “Gren said you live near me.”

Agnes nods and tells Lena her address. It is minutes from Lena’s flat, though tonight, that distance could be an hour. The elevator doors open, and a minute later they are walking through the freezing underground garage.

“I’m parked over here,” Lena says. “Before I forget, I’m going back tomorrow at seven. Do you want a ride?”

“If it isn’t inconvenient,” Agnes says.

“Of course not.” Lena pauses with her hand on the car door handle. “Wait. You’re not on duty tomorrow.”

“I know, but I want – I’d like to come in anyway. Is that all right? This case is–” Agnes’s eyes meet Lena’s over the car roof.

Lena knows what Agnes thinks: This chase has its claws in her. It is her first bad case, and it doesn’t look to improve anytime soon.

“It’s fine with me. I’ll talk to Gren.”

“Thank you. I mean it.”

To Lena’s amazement, the roads are less crowded than she feared. She turns on the radio to listen to the news, but interference makes the report sound like a broken transmission from a war front. Agnes is silent, apparently lost in thought, her eyes on the road ahead. Lena feels sorry for her; Agnes is keen, bright, and precise, always doing things by the book and the numbers. This mess must be agonizing for her too.

Agnes’s phone chimes. She looks down, reads, and turns to Lena. “I just received an email from the office about the files,” she says.

“That was quick. We’ve been gone only forty-five minutes.”

“Gren put five officers on going through the documents. I didn’t think he would do that.”

“He’s bright,” Lena says. “And the poor man trusts me. What’s the verdict?”

Agnes scrolls through the email. “This is interesting,” she says.

“Talk to me, or I swear I will confiscate your phone.”

“All complaints were filed by John’s art teacher.”

“Maybe they didn’t get along,” Lena suggests. “Hell knows I wasn’t best friends with many of my tutors. Anything more on what John actually did?”

“Nothing, I’m afraid. But as we thought, no files were forwarded from the school. John’s troubles were kept completely quiet.”

“Wonderful.” Lena sighs. “Leave it for now.”

Glancing at Agnes’s intent eyes and perfect uniform, Lena realises she knows nothing about the woman’s background. Agnes’s accent suggests she is from northern Sweden, but she cannot tell from where.

What she does know is that choosing Lena as a mentor had been a moronic decision. Someone among the brass must hate Agnes. Teaming up an officer just out of the academy with a senior detective whom many thought should go into mandatory retirement was strange, not to mention cruel. Perhaps they had thought Lena and Agnes would balance each other out.

Lena hopes she will not ruin the woman’s career; sometimes Agnes looks up at her with an eagerness that makes her want to scream. A medicated squirrel with insomnia would lead by better example. If Agnes knew about Lena’s history, she would agree. Instead, the woman depends on Lena for guidance and protection. And, worse, for advice. It is pure madness.

She wants to talk to Agnes, only that may spook her, perhaps so much that Agnes will want a different partner. That would be a disaster. Agnes is crucial to the case; bringing someone else up to speed will take too long. And even if Agnes says she did not care, she would see Lena in a new light. Every slight slip would be seen as a sign of going off the rails. Eventually, Agnes’s voice will join the choir of crows that caw behind Lena’s back.

The alternative is to keep quiet and let Agnes continue to see Lena as a pillar. A charade that will work for a time. But Lena’s mask will pale, perhaps crumble altogether at the wrong time, and that could get Agnes in trouble. It may get her killed.

Lena glares at the road while the crux burns in her mind. Coming clean to Agnes can cost Lena her job, and not warning her can cost the woman more than that.

“Have you eaten?” Lena asks.

“What?” Agnes says, startled out of her reverie. “Not dinner, no. Never had time this evening. But I’ve got food at home.”

“I’m sure you do.” Lena brakes and veers into another lane.

“The exit to where I live is–”

“I know where you live. We’re not going there.”

“Oh.” Agnes smiles nervously. “Then where are we going?”

“My flat,” Lena says. “We’ll eat there.” She can tell Agnes is anxious, but there is no going back.

“Why?”

“We need to talk.”

*

John

John tries to focus on the pen, but it quivers so fast it becomes a blur, threatening to morph into some different, more menacing item. Goosebumps rise on his arm as the cool draft from the canvas touches him. He stumbles backwards from the rising need to act, but he does not know what is happening.

Lennart reaches John and stops, his pen held high. “Wrists, please. Let’s make this smooth. Two small lines are all it takes.”

“Keep that thing away from me,” John shouts and stumbles behind his easel. The other students watch from the corner of their eyes while feigning interest in their paintings.

“Come, now,” Lennart says. “There’s no need to make a fuss. Just a small cut. There’s so much left of you. You’ve been lucky to not have been marked down before, but eventually, it happens to everyone. This is preparation for the world.”

“No.” John circles the easel and bumps into the stand, spilling flasks and brushes onto the floor. Lennart follows with the patience of someone who has all the time in the world.

John feels as if his mind is trying to straddle two places at once: a corrupt memory and a distorted now. The pen wavers in front of him.

Its tip narrows down to a sliver of nothing, sharp enough to puncture the fabric of past and present.

Lennart sighs and stops behind the easel. “This is very unlike you. What happened to my obedient John? The gifted lad who followed my instructions? The boy who used the colours and patterns I presented to him? The rosy red, the sky blue, the sunny yellow? When did you become whimsical?”

“I’ve no idea what you’re talking about,” John breathes. “I’m getting out of here.”

Lennart’s laugh sounds like a series of coughs. “There is no ‘out of here’,” he says. “Haven’t you understood that yet? What I teach is for life.”

Lennart steps around the easel and lashes out with the pen, and John darts in the other direction. Eventually, Lennart will corner him; the classroom is too confined, too crowded with people, easels and canvases for him to stay out of the teacher’s reach.

He looks over at the window through which he climbed in. Even if the school yard outside ends in an opaque mist, it is somewhere else, some place not here. He would rather run blind into the unknown than face this.

Lennart follows John’s gaze. “You are not ready to go there yet. All you’d find is another classroom. Larger and different, but still a classroom. And how would you fare there if you didn’t know the rules?”

Lennart shakes his head. “It’s better to stay here until you have learnt the art of the art, as it were. The survival skills. Making messes like that,” he says and gestures at John’s canvas, “will only get you in trouble. You’ll be rewarded with friction instead of ease. Is that what you want?”

“What I want,” John says and swallows, “is to get the hell out of here.”

John feints a dash to his right. Lennart moves to intercept him, his pen slashing downwards in a diagonal arc so close to John he can smell the sharp reek of the ink. At the last moment, John pulls back, grabs the easel, and shoves it at Lennart, who stumbles backward and

crashes into another student's painting, sending the canvas clattering onto the floor.

John runs for the window. He ignores the upturned jars of paint and the toppled chairs he leaves behind him. The window is a way out. Nothing else matters. Nightmare or not, another moment in the classroom and he is certain he will lose his mind, and maybe more.

He reaches the closed window, digs his fingers under the frame to slide it up, and cries out when he sees in the glass the reflection of Lennart standing behind him and stabbing down with the pen. The teacher had followed him impossibly fast.

An instant before the pen will hit, John hurls himself sideways, and the pen slices through the closed window as if it were made of paper. The glass gives off a faint *ping* and shatters in a cloud of shards. Lennart spins to John, who cowers on the floor.

"No," John chokes as Lennart leans down.

"You brought this onto yourself," Lennart says. "All I had in mind was a simple correction. A well-meant navigation mark on this wide sea, to keep you from losing yourself. Given your behaviour today, I have to mark you down quite severely. You're too stubborn, too undisciplined. I will set an example for the rest of the class and go to the heart of the problem, as it were."

As the pen plunges down towards John's face, his hands shoot up and clutch Lennart's wrists. The pen hovers near John's eyes. John wheezes and spits as he struggles to keep the pen from digging into him; he saw what it did to the window, and he can imagine what it can do to his body.

Blistering panic makes his mind spin. Were there any justice, any reason to what was happening, Lennart should not have been able to move so fast, or the pen should have slipped from where Lennart held it between his stumps. If there were any logic to this outlandish place, there would not be a room here, let alone windows, school yards or teachers.

Sweating, crying and gasping, John struggles to push the pen away, but Lennart forces it closer. Searching for an escape, John looks left and right. A short boy is looking at John's painting on the floor, where it fell from the easel. The boy pushes his glasses up on

the bridge of his nose, tilts his head, and reaches out to touch the canvas with the three fingers remaining on his hand.

“Hey,” the boy says over his shoulder. “There’s something in there. Check this out.”

The boy presses his fingers at the black crack in John’s painting and pushes his fingers into the colour, continuing down until his elbow is lost beneath the black surface. He laughs. “It’s warm in here.”

The boy pushes at the door on the painting, and the painted door swings open. Smiling, the boy dips forward and disappears into the painting. Nearby students gasp and close in on the canvas, crowding and elbowing each other.

“No,” Lennart roars. “That’s not allowed.” The teacher lets go of the pen and rises up from the floor. “Get away from the painting. Back off, all of you. You’re not ready.”

John gazes at his painting. The exit was right in front of him all the time. His mind, refusing to accept the absence of logic, had filed away the impossible wind as another freak phenomena. His way out is within reach.

The moment Lennart lets go of the pen, John scrambles towards the window and presses himself up along the wall. Shivering and bleeding, he stands with the pen held in both his hands. Across the room, another boy slips inside the door on the canvas. A girl follows, then one more.

The teacher struggles to push his way through the students to reach the painting. “Everyone stays here,” he roars. “No one escapes. You are not ready to go through. You’ll never be.”

“Whatever is in there,” a girl says and puts her feet inside the dark rectangle, “can’t be worse than you and your fucking pen.” She smirks at Lennart, slides down into the black paint, and vanishes.

Transfixed by the disappearing children, John draws a shuddering breath. He has to choose a way out. One path leads into the mist on the school yard, the other into a painting. Both are equally unreal, but the window is the easy option; the entire class mill around the canvas while Lennart tries to force his way through to the painting. Once the teacher reaches it, he will tear it apart.

Then again, the breeze from the canvas had been warm, while the school yard outside is a darkening landscape of frozen asphalt and fog. Cold means suffering and hurt. Warmth has to be the way forward.

Holding the pen over his head in a double-fisted grip, John charges at the teacher.

The students look up as he rushes over the floor and leaps over toppled chairs. Lennart's back fills his world until the teacher becomes a mountain, an animated block of granite that no doubt will break the pen. John shuts down the notion and instead pictures what the pen did to his chest. He has one chance.

With all his strength, John rams the pen into Lennart's back like a spear, then lets go and stumbles backwards.

Everything and everyone falls silent. Stares drift between Lennart and John. The teacher stiffens and turns around, leisurely, as if gyrated by invisible strings. His face is uncomprehending.

"This changes nothing," Lennart mumbles. "I'll be–"

Lennart falls sideways over a bench and drops to the floor. His head thuds on the carpet, and he goes motionless, staring at the ceiling with eyes blank as buttons.

The wind outside picks up. Curtains flutter as a breeze enters through the broken window. Beyond the trees and the fog, an oily murkiness rolls in like liquid charcoal. Soon the breeze grows stronger, more intent, pushing at the glass in hard gusts. The few trees in the school yard bend and nod in the gale as if pulled by ropes.

Under the rising wind is another sound, a subtle distortion of the gale. A sound he has heard earlier: the furious wail he had heard when he woke up. It has reached him again, borne by the wind from the depths, trying to snare him with its melody.

A shadow moves in the school yard and becomes more distinct as he watches, twisting and solidifying into a concrete form. The wind rattles the window frame and makes papers inside the classroom dance in wild circles. Around him, the other students cover their ears to shut out the piercing song.

Something is coming. Something immeasurable, vicious, and ravenous. He still does not know what it is, but he knows for whom it is searching.

Staggering, he steps over the teacher and runs to his painting. The students step back to give him room. Some grin, others frown, someone cries. They all look at him.

The girl who had stood next to John when he started painting looks up at him with a pensive smile. She raises her voice to make herself heard over the wind and the song.

“We knew you’d go,” she says. “No one ever told you, but we’re going to miss you. We’ll be jealous. You’ll be free, but fragile. Remember that.”

Distracted by the wail, John nods even though he does not understand. Snowflakes shoot in through the smashed window and whirl around the room in a glittering cyclone. The lights in the ceiling grow dim. Outside, the wail rises.

He turns to the canvas and prepares himself. His painting only vaguely resembles a door, but he has seen people disappear through it. The path is clear. There is a sense of depth to the colours, as if they form the liquid surface of a vertical tunnel.

He puts one foot on the canvas and watches it pass through as easily as if the colours were shadows. The other side is slightly warmer, though not much. He cannot feel any floor or ground. A girl nods encouragingly as he sits down and slowly lowers himself into the canvas.

When his arms cannot support his weight any more, he drops down and away. Looking up, he sees the diminishing light from the classroom: a bright square fading to a distant glow, and then nothing.

*

John

Curled up in the shadows at the bottom of the stairwell, John sleeps, breathing gently while the hushed sounds of the suburban winter night echo around him: TV sets on cautious volumes, water rushing through pipes, crying children refusing to go to sleep.

But he is not entirely at rest; deep in his determination is a persistent disturbance, a nuisance that refuses to go away: a spark of remorse and grace, steadily gaining in strength. It is only an insignificant speck of trouble, but trouble nonetheless. One loose thread can be enough to unravel his carefully woven path towards justice and revenge.

That must not happen.

He needs a tool that can extinguish this small flame.

John visits the most distant reaches of his soul, the remote corners where the most hurtful memories have been brushed away, and soon finds what he needs: A resurrected memory brought back from the grave. Bringing it to life is easy; after all, it is what the nuisance inside him is looking for.

All John needs to do is give it a voice.

*

John

The darkness is whisked away, and John looks up.

He is in Molly's kitchen, back in her flat, in another world. Wrapped in a green wool blanket, Molly sits across the table from him. The autumn chill leaks through the window, spills onto the floor, and pools around their bare feet. Sunshine tilts through the glass and turns her skin to freckled marble. Her eyes are never still; they dance, wink, promise and hint to the tune of her smile.

And her smile is for him.

"I know this is strange," she says. "A dream inside a memory. Or vice versa. But whichever is the case," she adds, "the tea is good. No one can take that away from me."

Between John and Molly are two cups, a large kettle, and the first painting he gave her: a small, framed canvas in bright oils. The motif, a lean woman's neck against a backdrop of smudged clouds, is full of flaws; John had been pleased with it before, but now every angle and stroke look off, as if the drive to Molly's flat had skewed the image.

John remembers what had happened. Molly had unwrapped the painting while he hid his trembling hands under the table, and she had loved it. John wanted to open the window and shout victory and defiance at the blue sky. The slightest frown from Molly would have been acid on his confidence.

Her eyes are wet as she looks at the painting. *Thank you*, she mouths.

"Do you like it?" John looks troubled. "I'm not sure the light is right."

"It's beautiful. Like you." She turns her eyes to him. Her smile shines. "Just like you."

John's cheeks burn. He knows he is not beautiful; he is the epitome of average. Overweight, overworked, stuck in the strands of

his past. Beauty and painting have been his lifelines for years. Now he has found to what the lines are anchored, and he will never let go.

She gently puts the painting down on the table. “I’ll put it next to the bed.”

John looks horrified. “It’ll stare at me, begging for corrections.”

“Don’t be silly. I want it close to me. It’s the first painting someone’s ever given me. And you made it.”

“You’re making me blush.”

“And the painting is of a neck. No eyes, no mouth. So it’ll be quiet. No begging.”

“Now you’re making fun of me.”

“It’s a compliment. All this painting begs for is for you to keep painting. You’re gifted.”

John is silent while he rides the crest of the moment.

“Bedroom it is,” Molly says and makes a satisfied sound. “Tea’s ready.” She lifts the kettle and fills John’s cup.

Outside the window, the light is weakening faster than it should. Shadows in the room deepen as he watches. The temperature is dropping, too; a web of frost is forming on the windowpane.

Glancing at the window, Molly rises up. She is still holding John’s hands. “I was hoping we’d have more time, but no luck. We haven’t got long. Come.”

“Where?”

“Where do you think?” she asks, her smile a warm beacon in the rising cold.

In the swirl of Molly’s purple sheets, John learns the literal meaning of making love: They wring an essence into existence, a river of belonging that fills his veins and washes away the grey. Molly and John force themselves tighter and closer to each other until there is no room between them for loneliness.

The room is freezing and the apartment is dark, but he doesn’t care; the two of them are a painting come alive, a wild sea of strokes, dales and rises. Her touch burns right through his prudence and his shyness. With Molly, only honesty matters.

Moments before he climaxes, she grabs his thinning hair and pulls him close. “Hurry,” she whispers. “Follow her, and be quick.

Before you lose us.”

“Follow whom?”

Molly holds John close to her. “She’s all you’ve got now,” she says. “Don’t lose her. You must run, or–”

Darkness closes around them like a glove of night.

*

Lena

Lena parks her car in the parking lot. With luck, she will not wake up and find it buried under a mountain of snow, although that is wishful thinking.

“Twenty-four flats and ten parking spots,” she says to Agnes and turns off the engine. “It makes you wonder what they were thinking. Let’s go before we’re snowed in.”

Lena turns the car alarm on and trudges to the entrance of a three-storey block of flats. Squares slabs of concrete painted white and grey, square windows, square tiles in the stairwells. The building always reminds her of a chessboard gone mad. She would not be surprised if the architect had argued for square doors as well.

Two flights of stairs later, Lena and Agnes stop outside Lena’s front door. Lena kicks the concrete wall to get the snow off her shoes, opens the door, and flicks the light on. “Enter at your own risk,” she says. “It’s even more chaotic than usual.”

Most of the flat is visible from the doorstep: yellow walls, worn wooden floor, stacks of fitness magazines, piles of pocketbooks and sideboards laden with folded clothes. A mountain bike is leaning against a wall. Behind it are rows of protein supplement jars.

Agnes walks into the hall and pauses at a four-storey shoe rack filled with neatly paired shoes.

“You collect shoes?” Agnes cannot hide her surprise.

“Don’t tell anyone,” Lena says. “That would ruin my she-man image at the office. Let’s eat.” She squeezes past Agnes, walks into the kitchen, and drops her coat on a chair at the kitchen table. Agnes follows and sits down hesitantly by the table.

“I’m making tea,” Lena says. “I’d rather have coffee, but seeing as I’ve been ordered not to work, I might as well catch some sleep. Do you want some? Tea, I mean. Not sleep.” She runs a hand through her hair and opens the fridge.

“If it isn’t too much trouble,” Agnes says.

“There’s a coat hanger in the bedroom,” Lena says from the other side of the open fridge door. “The light switch is on the left, near the desk. Just leave your jacket on the floor if you can’t find it. Living room’s in there; bathroom’s through that door.”

Agnes’s phone chimes, and she looks down. “The team going over the files in the box just emailed me,” she says.

“Have they found out what John did yet?”

Agnes frowns slightly while she reads. “I replied on our way here and asked them to widen the search, and they’ve found more complaint records. Over forty of them, in fact.”

“Christ.” Lena braces herself for more news on John’s unknown past. The box of files was a huge cardboard can of worms. “Let me guess,” she says. “John’s behaviour spiralled out of control?”

Agnes looks up. “It’s not John,” she says. “All these complaints are about the art teacher. The one who tried to get John kicked out. His name was Lennart Holm.”

“Past tense,” Lena notes. “Has he passed away?”

Agnes nods. “Cancer, eight years ago. The team looked him up against the tax authorities.”

“So John made objections of his own,” Lena says. “I suppose they were engaged in some kind of vendetta. A student gets on the nerves of a teacher, the teacher wants the kid gone, and the boy blames the teacher back. That can’t be unique, so I can’t see why the school would’ve kept silent about that?”

“Because it was other teachers who complained,” Agnes says. “Not John.”

“Oh.” Lena looks at Agnes for a long moment while her image of John is realigned. There had been a problem at the school, but perhaps she had the victim wrong. “Go on,” she says.

“Lennart’s colleagues thought Lennart was unfit for his job,” Agnes says. “They described him as overly authoritative, condescending, and prone to anger. They also accused him of actively trying to damage his students’ self-esteem. He regularly took works he didn’t like and tore them to pieces, even threw some of them out the window.”

“So in short,” Lena says, “he was a tyrant. And he singled John out as his pincushion, probably because he couldn’t take that John was talented.

What a fucking bastard.” She imagines John’s boot camp for adult life: daily fear of a man twice his size who couldn’t handle bright children.

“He didn’t sound like a pleasant man.” Agnes pockets her phone and looks up at Lena. “But did he really make a murderer out of John?”

“No,” Lena says. “Not yet. Did you want tea?”

“Yes, please. Black, if you have it.”

“Tea comes in colours?” Lena frowns at the box of tea bags in her cupboard. “I’ve got Pricesmart extra, and that’s it. I’m not much of a tea person.”

“Any tea is good, really.” Agnes flashes a smile.

“Pity.” Lena turns on the gas stove and fills a saucepan with water. “I was hoping you’d demand coffee. That would’ve given me an excuse to have some too.”

“If you want, I could–”

“Never mind. Help yourself to anything in the fridge if you’re hungry. I’m having this.” Lena holds up a small metal bowl. “Tuna and cottage cheese. Emergency food.”

Agnes watches in silence as Lena spreads the mix on slices of dark bread. “I’m good, thank you.”

“If you want some,” Lena says, “you know where to look.” She turns the blinds open and nods at the curtain of snowflakes outside. “Would you look at this? I could’ve slept in a sofa at the office, but no, I need to rest at home. Gren’s fussing is driving me insane.” She yawns so wide her jaws ache.

“I think he means well,” Agnes says. “He cares about you.”

“He fusses.” Lena gestures at the snow with the sandwich in her hand. “We could’ve stayed at the headquarters and gone over our data. Maybe we missed something important. In fact, we can go over all we know right here. I know you won’t tell Gren. I think your tea’s ready.”

“Thank you.” Agnes uses a fork to fish the tea bag out of her cup.

“The bin’s over there. Ignore the obvious need to take it out. Do you have any new ideas about John?”

Agnes shakes her head. “I think he’s still near the crime scene, looking for the other man.”

“That’s my thought too.” Lena takes another bite of her sandwich and looks at the parking lot below the window. “But John must be indoors, or

he’d die.”

“Lena?”

“What?” Lena turns from the window, takes another bite from her sandwich, and raises her eyebrows at Agnes.

Agnes sits perfectly still and holds her cup in both hands. “Why am I here?”

Lena stops chewing. She looks away, out the window, down at the floor and at the kitchen table. There is no escape. Then again, she had chosen this battle the moment she took Agnes here. She moves piles of advertising and post from the table to make room for her cup and her sandwich, then sits down with her arms crossed and looks at her tea.

“Why do I have this feeling you already know what I’m going to say?” Lena asks.

Agnes looks perplexed, but Lena continues to watch her, waiting for an answer. “You’re going to tell me not to worry about you?” Agnes hazards.

Lena blinks. “Why would you do that?” she asks. “Gren is already troubled enough for ten people. No, that’s not it.”

“I’m listening.”

Lena nods. Agnes always listens. She often feels as if she babbles in the younger officer’s company. No matter how she tries, she cannot remember anyone else having that effect on her. Despite the weather, the kitchen is warm and stuffy; her back is prickled with sweat.

She opens the window a fraction. When the air has cooled, she reaches for her coat, takes out her badge, and puts it on the table. After a moment, she tentatively places her gun next to the badge. The leather-encased weapon seems to suck in the light from the low lamp above the table.

Lena takes a deep breath. “We talked about nicknames before,” she says. “When we were outside John’s flat.”

“I remember.”

“And you’ve heard them,” Lena says. It is a statement, not a question.

Agnes grimaces, but she has the grace to nod. “Yes. But like I said, I don’t care.”

“I do, although I don’t let it show very often. I want to tell you the reason behind some of those names.”

“I already know you’re not queer.”

“Not that.” Lena pushes the window open a little more and watches the snow. “The reason for the other nicknames.” She ticks them off on her fingers. “She-man, Bella bicep, bag lady.”

“The first two are easy,” Lena says. “They’re coined by idiots who can’t cope with women who work hard or work out. Or have any brains at all. The last one, though, has a history. And you need to know.”

“Are you sure?” Agnes asks.

“I’m definite.” Lena’s eyes flutter to the gun and back at Agnes. *Keep your voice steady. Just talk.*

“Five years ago,” Lena says, “in October, I was in a raid outside Stockholm. Gren was in charge. It was part of Operation Guardian. You look as if you remember it?”

“That child abuse ring?” Agnes asks.

“Child porn. Things you would not believe. Thousands of photos, hours of film, all swapped around on a secret website. They’d been running it for years before we learned about them. If you scraped the bottom of human nature, you’d still have to drill down to find the like of these people.”

Lena rises from her chair, fills a glass with water, and sits back down. “But we found them out, and we got them. Part of the gang was Swedish. I was on the team set to bring them in, only the raid didn’t go as planned.

“The house was an old, large one-storey villa. Red walls, tiled roof, small backyard shed. Surrounded by fields and woods, almost a kilometre to the nearest neighbour. A little idyllic place full of rot and horror. The house is gone now. Someone torched it.

“We knew from recon that the suspect was in the house, but we didn’t know about his friends. No one had come or left for days, and there was only one car outside, so we thought he’d be alone. As it turned out, the suspect was running a little molesting-party for five of his friends.”

“Oh, God.” Agnes’s face goes stiff. “There were children there?”

“No children, but films and photos. It was an orgy. They had even rigged a projector. I had been naïve enough to think these perverts did their thing alone, in private. I was wrong.

“Just before we were meant to go in, minutes before our reinforcements and our helicopter got there, they started to leave. To this day, I don’t know if they had an alarm set up. The bastards were sophisticated. We had to move.”

Lena clears her throat and continues. “There were twelve officers, including me. A two-to-one ratio, as it turned out. Most of the time, that’s enough, but these men fled and fought like possessed. They knew what they faced, the prison sentences and the media attention. Maybe they knew what happens to their ilk in prison, too. I’ve heard stories about inmates who use pins and shards of glass to get creative on rapists.”

“So they ran,” Agnes says.

“Our suspect’s friends did. It was the middle of the night, and the whole area was a circus of torches, shadows and shouts. At that point, we didn’t know how many there were. The helicopter was nowhere near and had no infrared scanners.

“While the other officers ran after the people who fled,” Lena continues, “a colleague and I went to the house to search for anyone hiding and to seize any evidence we found. The house was dark; the only light was our torches and a film projected on the wall. One of their films.”

Lena pauses to refill her glass. She has to use both hands to keep it from shaking under the tap. Agnes is sitting even more still than she was before Lena began to speak.

“We came upon two men in the living room,” Lena says and sits down. “They were throwing hard drives and DVDs into a wood-fired stove. When we ordered them to lie down, one of them tried to tackle my colleague, and they both tumbled into the room next door, wrestling and shouting. I was left with the last man.

“He was in his fifties, almost bald, small glasses, bright blue hooded sweater, new trainers. Your classic office grunt on downtime. He stands there and screams nonsense at me, backlit by that film. The projector was in the ceiling, and I couldn’t reach it to switch it off.

“The man I faced was the main suspect, but I didn’t realise that in the chaos. I told him again to drop down on the floor, but instead he walked closer, pointed at his chest, and screamed about rights and warrants, lawyers and laws, how he’s going to sue me. And so on.”

“You must have been so furious,” Agnes says quietly.

Lena nods. “I wanted to rip his tongue out. I wanted to point at the film behind him and ask him what fucking rights he thought he had. I wanted to see what happened to him in prison, every minute of it. But I didn’t.

“All I did was keep my pistol trained on the floor, in front of his feet, and tell him to back away, to lie down, over and over. But he didn’t. He was too busy justifying what he was doing and telling me I had no right. Breaking into his house was against the law; this was his private property, et cetera.”

Lena shakes her head. “I pointed to the movie and screamed at him, ‘Do you think I’m blind? That’s a *child*.’ I may have added something about what he could expect in prison. He looked over his shoulder as if he’d never seen the film before, turned back to me and said, ‘He likes it. You all do.’”

Agnes pales a shade. “He said that?”

“Exactly that,” Lena says. “And more.”

“That’s unbelievable.”

“Then he tried to take my gun. Maybe he thought I didn’t have the guts to shoot, or perhaps he hoped he’d be faster than I was. He almost succeeded. I was distracted by the fighting in the other room, and I almost lost hold of my pistol when he made a grab for it. I tried to shove him away, but he was frantic. He even bit my hand.” She holds up her right hand and points at a pale curved line below her little finger.

“When that didn’t work,” Lena continues, “he tried to punch me but lost his balance. We stumbled around the room, fighting over the gun. Right when the pistol happens to point at his head, he manages to hook his thumb inside the trigger guard and pull the trigger. The gun went off, right into his mouth.”

Agnes raises her hands to her mouth. “So that’s why,” she whispers.

“Why what?”

“Why they call you that name. *Bag lady.* They mean a body bag?”

Lena nods, unsurprised by how fast Agnes made the connection. “It’s strange how those with no sense of humour always are the loudest. But there’s more. And this is where I need you to believe me.” She leans forward. “When he was shot, a spasm went through him, and he pulled the trigger again. I couldn’t stop him. His thumb was stuck, and he was flailing like a ragdoll on strings.”

“He was shot more than once?” Agnes asks.

“Four times. My colleague tried to revive him, but my – the first shot took most of the man’s neck with it.”

Agnes looks down at her untouched tea. “What happened then?” she asks.

“Standard procedure. I briefed the others, called in to report, and bagged the gun. Our backup arrived, and the other men were arrested. Apparently the shots made them give up. The helicopter finally came and took me back to the office, where I did the paperwork and slept on a couch. Enter five years of fretting bosses and nice nicknames. Gren is stuck between blaming me for the disaster and feeling sorry for me.”

A long silence settles in the kitchen. The two women look at each other while the wind pushes against the window. Agnes looks devastated, which catches Lena off guard; she had expected disgust or disbelief. That had been easier to deal with. Compassion always left her embarrassed and flustered.

Agnes shakes her head. “I don’t know what to say.”

“There’s no need to say anything,” Lena says. “But I can see you have questions. Ask them.”

Agnes opens and closes her mouth several times. “Is this why you work so hard?” she asks. “Does it help with the memories?”

Lena shakes her head and pokes at a non-existent spot on the table. “I do my job because I want to help. It’s that simple. But you’re right, in a way; I’ve done longer shifts and slept less since that night, because I need to keep busy.”

Agnes peers at Lena. “You want to make amends,” she says softly. “You’re wearing yourself thin because you feel guilty.”

“Of course I’m guilty,” Lena snaps. “I screwed up and shot a man. There are no excuses. And yes,” she adds, “the reason I want to catch John is to stop him from damning himself too.”

Agnes shakes her head. “Damnation is intent, to hurt on purpose. Or so I choose to believe. But even the best of people make mistakes, and what happened to you was an accident.”

“I lost control,” Lena says. “That’s not an accident. There was a moment when I should have reined myself in, but I didn’t. I was too furious.”

Frowning, Lena clears her throat. She wonders how much of her thoughts she wants to share. Talking to Agnes is unsettlingly easy, and the urge to share is almost overwhelming. At least those parts she is willing to discuss.

“All I can do now,” Lena continues, “is try to stop other people from repeating my mistake. Few realise how steep and slippery the slope is. If a similar thing happens to me again, I’d–” She grimaces and looks away. “It would definitely get me fired, and probably leave me in an asylum.”

“And would not finding John in time be such a mistake?” Agnes asks.

Still looking away, Lena nods. “I can’t let that happen. Saving him won’t change my past, but it’s my only road ahead.”

After a long moment, Lena sighs and turns back to face Agnes. “You needed to know,” she says, “so you can decide if you still want to work together with me.”

“Of course I do.” Agnes pauses. “I just wish there was something I could do to help you.”

Lena shrugs. “You listen. That’s a lot right there. And you don’t call me names, at least not to my face.”

“I’d never–”

“I know.” Lena yawns. “But now you know why I see a psychologist, why Gren is concerned, and why he thinks it’s a good idea that I waste time sleeping instead of doing my job.”

Agnes sits still and watches the table. “Can I ask you something?”

“Sure.”

“It’s not about what you told me now.”

“Just ask.”

“I’ve noticed that you always switch off the water coolers when you’re in the conference rooms, but I’ve never asked why?”

“Ah.” Lena puts her elbows on the table and rests her face in her hands. “In fact, that is related to what I told you. It’s the sound. That thick, awful gurgle the air bubbles inside the canister make when you tap water from it.”

“You don’t like that noise?”

“That’s exactly how the man in the house sounded when he died.” Lena makes a grimace. “A great cough of blood, beer and bile before he stopped breathing. That bastard. I wish I were religious, because then I’d know where he’d be right now.”

Lena stands up and pushes her chair back. “I need to sleep. You can take my car, but if you don’t want to drive home, there’s a sofa in the living room. Push whatever is on it down on the floor. There are blankets in the wardrobe in the hallway.”

Agnes stands up too. “I’ll go. I don’t want to be an inconvenience.”

“If you end up in a pile-up on the highway, then you’d be an inconvenience. And I’d be mad at you, too. It’s your call. See you tomorrow.”

Lena locks herself inside the bathroom and exhales. After a moment in the dark, she flicks the switch and blinks in the white glare. Her reflection makes her shudder. Her eyes are bloodshot, her skin pasty. There are crumbs of bread at the corners of her mouth.

She brushes her teeth, rinses her face, and presses a towel against her cheeks, wondering if anyone ever truly feels as if their thoughts race. Hers never do. The more tired or stressed she is, the slower her brain works.

Lena pauses in front of the bathroom mirror and studies herself in the unforgiving light. Speaking silently, she lets her mouth form the lies she told Agnes a few minutes earlier. The words come with ease. They have been well rehearsed. Practise makes perfect.

Agnes deserves better, but she cannot lose the woman’s trust. Not before John is brought in. She needs Agnes and the woman’s eagerness and ambition, so once again, she has to twist part of her past into a plausible story. A wrong to make a right.

She turns out the light, walks to the bed, and lies down. Less than a minute later, Lena sleeps.

Agnes

In Lena’s living room, Agnes carefully moves Lena’s crumpled clothes and fitness magazines from the short leather sofa onto the floor. When the sofa is visible, she lies down and waits for Lena to fall asleep.

The screen of snow outside the window makes the light on the ceiling wave and flutter. Across the room is the television set’s standby light, a distant blue star in the near-dark. The wind is an urgent whistle.

When Agnes has not heard a sound from Lena for half an hour, she cautiously rises from the sofa, pausing at every creak of leather, and pads quietly into Lena’s bedroom.

Lena is asleep, lying on her side with her legs pulled up and her hands crossed over her stomach. Her eyes flutter and dart behind her eyelids. She is still dressed. On a bedside table is a textbook on criminal profiling, a mobile phone manual, and a bird watching guide. A low bookshelf is half-filled with workout magazines and newspapers. A thick grey curtain hides a large window.

Agnes looks around the room and takes in its bare blue walls, the pale wooden floor. A heavy security lock is mounted on the window. Goosebumps cover Lena’s wrists; even though the small radiator under the window is hot, the room is cool, almost cold.

Taking care not to wake her, Agnes spreads a blanket over Lena and stands back. For several minutes, she stands still and watches Lena sleep while winter pushes at the window.

Agnes starts to cry. Sobbing mutedly, she hugs herself as her tears fall on the blanket she has placed over Lena. She watches the bright red minutes on Lena’s alarm clock tick away, one by one.

When a door slams far away, she starts and dries her face with her hands. When the tears have stopped and her face is dry, she leans down over Lena, hesitates, and kisses the nape of Lena’s neck.

Lena sighs, mumbles, and smiles in her sleep.

Agnes shivers and bites her lip. She makes sure the blanket covers Lena’s hands, slowly rises from the bed, and leaves the apartment.

*

John

John wakes up screaming.

He sits bolt upright and finds himself in a meadow some fifty steps wide. The echo of his scream dwindles away while he looks down at the damp grass. At his sides is a different kind of wall: trees, old and thick, huddled together. Miriam crouches close to his side. The light from her lantern is weak, but much better than the midnight beyond its glow.

“I dreamt,” John whispers.

Only the sensations of his dream remain. There had been a woman whose warm presence engulfed him, and somehow, she had disappeared, been taken from him. Two emotions ring in him: a great love and an even greater loss. Then the cold had found him again and forced him to run.

His escape had been narrow. Next time, he might be too slow, and he knows the cold will come again.

“I can’t take this anymore.” John takes off his beanie, runs his hands through his hair, and stares at the wall. “I’m serious. I could have died in there. I know I must go on, but there’ll only be more traps, more madness.”

Miriam squeezes his shoulder. “You came through alive. That’s what matters. Now we must go on. We haven’t got long.”

“This is a forest,” John notes. “It’s not where I woke up.”

“You woke here this time because you rose higher. Which is great,” she adds. “From the woods, it’s a matter of making it out. You broke free from the cell below when you went up.”

John shakes his head. “I went down,” he says. “I fell through a painting in my dream.”

Miriam nods and grimaces impatiently. “This place is not particular about relative directions, so to say.”

“What?”

“Your up is another one’s down, your escape someone else’s entrance. Yes? It’s what you do that matters, and right now, that should be running. The jailer of said cell is still after you.”

“Wait.” Still breathing hard, John stares at the canopy above him. “Why art?” he asks. All the canvases and brushes I saw. Am I a painter?”

“Do you feel like one?”

“I feel tired, frightened, and hungry. Beyond that, it’s a blur.” He pauses. “But I suppose I could’ve been an artist. It sounds like a good job.”

Miriam laughs softly. “You were always an artist, you idiot. Even back in school. Your drawings were loved, saved, kept close.”

John glances at Miriam. “Are you sure?”

“But you never understood.” Miriam sighs. “You’d no idea of your potential. In your defence, few people have, but you in particular were a sun believing itself a barren moon. That’s why you got so much flak. Envy always snaps at passion’s heels. Sometimes, jealousy eats its prey whole.”

“Very poetic.”

“Thank you.” She frowns. “Was that sarcasm?” she asks. “If so, that’s good. Snark is a sure sign of sanity.”

John peers at Miriam. She wears her hat pulled down low, just above her eyes, and tilts her head slightly when she speaks. When she stands still, she crosses her feet and sways slightly, as if bending in a wind.

It is a habit of hers. Sometimes, she loses her balance and trips herself. On a break in his old school yard, he had once helped her up after a fall, brushed the snow off her jacket, looked at her face, and fallen in love. He had been fourteen years old.

“You’re Miriam Gustavsson,” he says. “I was in high school. You were one year below me, and your family lived five houses away. Your mum used to wave at me from your kitchen window.” He pauses. “I was crazy about you for years. Long after you moved, even. And now you’re here again.”

Miriam looks at John while concern fights the playfulness in her face.

“Although,” John says quietly, “I guess you’re not really here.”

“Hey.” Miriam takes his hand in hers. “For all it matters, I am here. And I’m tasked with getting you out.”

“Why you?”

“I’m your first great crush.” Miriam grins and makes a small curtsy. “Your second, too. Your third, fourth, and so on. I am all your careful glances, those longing thoughts, the letters and emails you never sent.”

John is silent. “I don’t understand.”

“I am many,” Miriam says and spreads her arms wide. “Your legion of lovers you had, or didn’t have. All the ones who gave you hope. And on this particular night, I’m your personal guiding star.”

John shakes his head and files away Miriam’s explanation for later investigation. “I dreamt of another woman,” he says. “I loved her. I think I still do.” He looks up. “Is it her I’m going back to find?” he asks. “Is she waiting for me up there?”

Miriam’s face grows still. “I’m sorry,” she says. “That woman is only here now. And unless we hurry, she will vanish.”

“Do we have to run again?” John looks around while a current of air tugs at his hair. He is sure there had been no wind a moment ago.

“You’re close to the exit,” Miriam says. “It will make a last effort to keep you here. Trust nothing you see.”

“It?” John asks, then hears the song: long, jagged tones fused into a disjointed tune, carried up from the depth by the wind.

The voice under the lake is coming for him.

*

John

John wakes up seven minutes before his alarm is set to go off.

When he is certain no one is in the stairwell, he leaves the stairwell and enters the pale and still Saturday morning. The clouds have shed most of their burden and are content to sprinkle a fine shower of glittering snowflakes over the suburb. The hum of traffic is gone. Few move on the streets; while the blizzard has settled, the cold continues to keep people indoors.

He walks back to Brommanplan and finds that his assumption was right: One of the men who had seen John's quarry is sitting on the bench where he had sat yesterday, waiting for the nearby liquor store to open. It is one of the men, but not the right one.

John goes to a bus stop and watches the man. Yesterday's milling lines of commuters have been replaced by people drifting home from Friday night revelries or heading towards their weekend jobs. Taxis pick up huddled groups of tourists leaving the single-storey budget hotel. Red buses negotiate snow-filled lanes.

After a while, another man, red-faced, bearded and obese, joins the first man on the bench. He is the one whom his friends had interrupted when John spoke to them yesterday.

Close to the two men, half-hidden under a cluster of trees, is a public toilet: a green metal booth almost too small for a single person. Its door faces towards John, away from the men. He moves closer to the toilet and waits behind a tree.

After half an hour, one of the men walks to the wine shop and returns ten minutes later with a plastic bag filled with bottles. A moment later, the bearded man on the bench rises and walks towards the public toilet. John waits until the man is inside and moves around the toilet, keeping out of the other man's view.

When John hears the man inside the toilet unlock the door, he walks up to the door and waits. The door opens, and the two men stand face to face outside the toilet's entrance.

“Wha–” the man blurts.

John pushes the man back inside the toilet. The man staggers backwards, thuds back-first into the wall, and John follows, pulling the door shut behind him.

With two men inside the booth, there is almost no space to move. The air reeks of disinfectants, cheap soap and urine. The bearded man’s eyes are bloodshot and his breath is foul, but he is more alert than John has anticipated.

The man grabs John’s jacket and pulls John close. “What the hell d’you think you’re–”

John drives his fist into the man’s left temple. The man moans and raises his hands, but John strikes again, this time ramming his other fist deep into the man’s stomach.

For a long moment, the man leans on the wall, bent over in agony, spitting and wheezing. John stands silent beside him. When the man can talk again, he looks up at John.

“What have I done to you?” the man asks, shaking as he speaks.

“Do you remember me?” John asks.

“Yes, but I haven’t–”

John takes the printed image from his pocket and holds it under the man’s face.

The man looks at it and turns away. “Oh, fuck,” he mumbles.

“Where does the man in the picture score?” John asks. “Who does he buy from?”

“I’ve no idea,” the bearded man mumbles. “I don’t know him. It could be anyone.”

“Yesterday you said that you knew. I want his dealer’s name and address.”

The man groans. “Are you fucking stoned?” he rasps. “They’re not the kind of people you rat on.”

“I am not stoned,” John says, “but I’m in a hurry.” He folds the image, puts it back in his pocket and takes out his knife. The fluorescent light in the ceiling tints the blade green.

The man’s pupils balloon at the sight of the blade. “Don’t,” he says and raises his hands. Names, numbers and addresses tumble off his tongue as if the words crowded his mouth.

John stands still, knife in hand, and listens for key details among the trickle of slurred syllables. He memorizes the important details. Once he knows all he needs to know, he tells the man to be quiet.

The man breathes hard. Sweat covers his forehead. “Can I go now? I just want to leave. Please.”

“You can leave in a minute.” John uses his free hand to take a large bottle from his bag. He hands it to the man and orders him to drink it.

The man’s face is slack with incomprehension. “Why?” he asks in a broken voice. “What is it?”

“Read the label.”

“Whiskey?” the man says, confused. “Why would you give me that? It’s poison, isn’t it?” he whimpers. “You’re going to poison me.”

“It’s not poison. Drink, or I will cut your throat open.”

The man takes the bottle with a quivering hand and drinks.

When the bottle is empty, John puts the knife away and tells the man to sit down. The man obeys sluggishly. John exits the public toilet, closes the door, and leaves for the underground.

John

Twenty minutes later, John arrives in Hässelby.

The train wheezes to a halt at the end of the line and opens its doors. Wind and snow rush into the car, followed by a handful of frozen people. A voice announces the remaining time until the train leaves for the city.

John rises, grabs his bag, leans out and looks around.

The open-air platform is flanked by tower blocks, their windows like bright mosaic tiles against the dim morning light. Deep in the gentle snowfall, on the other side of a small outdoor shopping centre, a red light pulses at the top of a soaring chimney. It marks the end of the suburb; past the power plant is the waterfront, beyond that a wide strait where the snow blends with the sky into grey nothingness. The wind plucks at John's clothes.

He walks down a sloping tunnel in the middle of the platform and looks over the turnstiles. A handful of people wait for their buses. No security staff. On his right, outside the station, a local bus empties passengers who march with determined steps towards the station.

John crosses the street, plods through the snow past a grocery shop, and turns a corner. He pauses in a roofed area lined with empty cigarette packets and beer cans. The thick snow muffles the sounds of voices and cars.

He has been here many times. The area, its contours, all the lights are familiar. So are the criss-crossing parkways, the parking lots and the sparse patches of pine trees. Most streets in this suburb are named after fruits that would not last a minute in the climate.

The man he looks for lives on one of them.

John doubles back along a road parallel to the underground rail. He is heading towards the previous underground train station, located closer to John's destination but also closer to local offices and diners. It often had security staff. The end station, like this morning, does not.

When he nears the station, he turns and follows a pathway towards a massive block of flats, a towering rectangle in red brick with hundreds of

windows. Apart from a man walking his dog in the distance, he passes no one.

He follows the façade to the end of the block. Along the ground floor are metal meshes over the windows, all dark except one where huge aquariums light them in a shimmering green. When he reaches the end of the block, he stops outside a door in glass and pale wood.

Inside is a dim stairwell with walls in yellow and brown. He tries to glance at the list of names inside, but the light is too weak for him to make out the numbers.

John tries the door. It is locked.

He takes a step back and looks up at the windows above the stairwell. All of them are dark. He moves back and puts the bag down on the ground, then stops as a woman in a brown coat opens the front door. At her feet is a small dog on a pink lead. When she sees John, she stops and peers at him.

John nods and smiles while he catches the door to stop it from closing. The woman's dog barks furiously, its claws scrabbling on the icy ground as it tries to reach John. The woman frowns, shakes her head, and walks off towards a park, half-dragging her dog behind her.

He watches her disappear around a corner. When the woman is out of sight, he walks through the door and closes it behind him.

Inside the stairwell, everything is silent. The thick smell of deep-fried oil fills the air. He looks at the list of names and finds the flat he is looking for: ground floor, the first on his left, inside a corridor.

John considers the number of doors, the location of windows. If he is correct, the flat is a small studio apartment with one window set low in the building's front, just outside the front door. Anyone inside the flat could have seen him.

He puts the bag down on the granite floor and takes out a small axe. Its head is heavy and full-sized while its wooden shaft is as short as a wine bottle. After a look around to make sure he is alone, he tucks the axe under his jacket and presses his left arm to his side to keep it in place. When he is certain he will not drop it, he walks up to the flat and looks at the dark peeping hole.

The man who lives behind the door is the next link in the chain, another component that separates John from resetting the balance. One way or

another, he will get the information from the dealer and find his ultimate target.

He knocks on the door.

Silence.

He waits for a minute and knocks again.

Nothing.

John raises his hand to try a third time when he hears something scrape against the floor inside the flat. A muffled curse follows the sound. A shadow passes in front of the peeping hole.

“Who’s there?” a male voice asks from inside the flat.

“Jerry,” John whispers. “Are you Mick?”

“I don’t know any Jerry. Piss off.”

“I’m – I’m sorry,” John says and coughs. “Someone said I could buy from you. He gave me the address.”

“Who the fuck said that?” the man inside hisses.

John gives the name of the man John left near-unconscious in the public toilet at Brommaplan. He speaks with a weak, trembling voice.

Another curse sounds from inside the flat. “That fuckhead sent you here?” the unseen man asks. “I’ll knock his teeth out. This isn’t a bloody corner shop. I don’t sell anything. Now, sod off.”

John hears another male voice inside the flat. There are two men behind the door.

“Please,” John says and raises his voice. “Let me in. I’ve got cash.” He flashes the wad of bills in front of the peephole and puts the money away.

A long silence follows. “Show me your face,” the man inside says.

John leans close to the peephole. He licks his lips, looks to his sides, and stammers another plea.

“Fucking junkie,” the man mutters. “This is bullshit.” He raises his voice. “Let me see your hands.”

John raises his hands, careful not to drop the axe squeezed tight in his armpit.

“Fine,” the man says. “Get inside, quick.”

The other voice behind the door makes a protesting sound, but the first man with whom John has spoken hushes him. There is a dull metal thud as a bolt slides back, followed by the rustle of a security chain. The door opens a hand’s breadth.

John looks into a pale, narrow face pocked with acne scars. The man is in his late twenties and wears a red hooded jumper, black jeans and orange trainers. His hands are out of John’s sight, hidden by the door and the wall.

The man is a head shorter than John; behind him, John sees a dim flat crowded with boxes and plastic bags. An open built-in wardrobe houses a stationary computer, its monitor glowing with a racing car waiting at the start line. Green shabby curtains cover a window on the opposite wall.

On the floor are plastic bags, blankets, pizza boxes, piles of crumpled tissue and empty cans. A candlestick holder balances on an old portable TV with streaks of paraffin tracing its sides.

The man nods at John. “Give me the money. Hurry up.”

Just as John reaches for the shaft of his axe, the other man inside the flat looks around the door.

Behind Mick is the man who fled from Molly’s house.

Even though the printed image from the surveillance camera is poor, John has studied the photo long enough to be sure. The man has the correct features, the right hair, the matching clothes. John came to the flat looking for a link in the chain, but now the chain has rushed through his hands and reached its end.

“Come on,” the man in the doorway urges. “I haven’t got all day.”

“That’s correct,” John says.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” the man demands.

“And my name is not Jerry.”

The man frowns and looks John up and down. “Then who the fuck are you?” he asks.

“I am Molly Berglund’s lover,” John says, and rams the blunt end of the axe head into the man’s face.

*

Lena

Lena wakes up to the frantic beeping of her alarm clock.

Her first thoughts are on her dreams: Surrounded by large birds, she had soared through clouds, not knowing where she was going but feeling that she needed to go faster. The echo of beating wings lingers in her head.

She grimaces, reaches over to stop the beeping, and falls back onto the bed. Only the bedside clock and the street lights outside illuminate the room. The sun is an hour from rising. Disconnected thoughts whirl in her mind; were it not for the time displayed on the clock, she would think she had slept only a few minutes.

She sighs, stares at the ceiling, and closes her eyes. Now Agnes knows the truth. At least, she knows all that Lena has told her. It is good enough for now. She rises from the bed and frowns at the blanket, wondering when she pulled it over her. Perhaps she was more tired than she had thought.

That does not matter; five hours of sleep is enough. She has booked the basement gym and needs a quick session. Cool iron and gravity never fail to clear her head, and her thoughts are a dense pack of loose ends.

But there is no time this morning. She needs to get back to the office. John will soon move again, if he has not already, and he must be tired. He will leave a trace. When he does, she will be ready.

She is making sandwiches when her mobile phone rings. She takes a bite and looks at the display. It is Agnes.

Lena takes the call. “Any news?” she asks, speaking as she chews.

“The footage is ready,” Agnes says. “It came in only minutes ago. They’ve been working on it all through the night. It’s at the office.”

“Perfect.” Lena remembers that Agnes had been in the flat when she fell asleep. The younger officer must have slept less than Lena, yet she sounds alert and wide awake.

“Or we can go to John’s house at Drottningholm,” Agnes suggests. “Gren has got hold of a helicopter.”

“First the film,” Lena says. “It’s unlikely that John’s gone to the house if the road out there’s blocked by snow. And if he has, he’ll probably stay

put.”

“I understand.”

“We need to find the other man. Wherever he is, that’s where John’s heading. What took them so long to get the film ready?” Lena asks.

“The quality was bad, so Gren got some company to go over the footage and do what they could to improve it.”

“Ah.”

“The full brief is on the system. It’s a lot of reading. I’m have borrowed a car. Do you want me to meet you up?”

“Sure.” Lena tears another bite from her sandwich. “I’m ready in ten minutes.”

“Are you all right? You sound like you’re choking.”

“Ten minutes,” Lena says again. “I’ll see you soon.”

Lena hangs up and does her round through her flat: Quick shower, coat, gun, notepad, phone, keys. She pauses when brushing her teeth, takes a short wildlife knife from a drawer, and puts it in the pocket of her coat. She is almost done with the mascara when Agnes calls again.

“I’m in the parking lot,” Agnes says. “Have you seen your car today?”

“No,” Lena replies. “Why?”

“It’s ploughed in. I can see only the roof.”

“I bloody knew it.” Lena sighs and crouches to tie her shoes. “Can I ride with you?”

“Of course.”

“I’ll be right down.”

Forty-five minutes later, Lena and Agnes walk out of the elevator at the police headquarters. “The DVD is in room twelve,” Agnes says. “I’ll get Gren.”

Lena nods and continues down a corridor. She gets black coffee from a coffee vending machine, takes three bananas from another department’s fruit basket, walks into the room, and closes the door behind her.

She puts her food on the table and sits down in an office chair close to a whiteboard. Thirty seconds later, Agnes and Gren walk in.

“Morning,” Gren says. “How are you feeling?”

Lena peels her banana. “Never better. Run the film from the station first. I want to see this second suspect.”

Agnes switches on the projector and walks over to a computer at the back. Gren, unshaved and dressed in a grey, wrinkled shirt, sits down next to Lena. He smells sharply of deodorant. Lena wonders if he slept in the office.

A white rectangle lights up the whiteboard and changes into an image of a station floor. It is centred on the turnstiles, with the steel-and-Plexiglas ticket box on the right and the doors in the distance. Two security guards in green overalls lean on one of the turnstiles. Fluorescent lights in the high ceiling light the room. People frozen in mid-step cover the dark, wet floor.

The camera is mounted in a corner high above the floor and reveals only part of the faces of the people passing below.

“Is this the best angle we could get?” Lena asks.

“I’m afraid so.” Agnes starts the film, and people snap into movement.

Lena leans close to the screen and peers at the faces passing past the camera’s view. “This is like looking for a fish in a river,” she mumbles.

Minutes pass while she scrutinizes every man. Her eyes water with the effort. She is about to ask Agnes to take a break when she spots the man.

“That’s him,” she shouts. “Stop the bloody film. That’s our man.”

Agnes rewinds the footage a few seconds and presses play again. A man slams the station doors open and stalks across the floor, towards the turnstiles. The security guards look up. A woman jumps out of the man’s way. Agnes pauses the film just as the man fumbles for his money at the ticket stall. The picture flickers between two images, making the man’s fingers quiver.

Lena looks at the man. If she is right, those hands had held a gun minutes before he was filmed. They had cupped the cold metal, pulled the trigger, shook as the weapon fired. The man was small; the recoil must have shaken his entire frame.

She wishes she could rewind the tape and follow the man back to the flat, up the stairs, through the door, all the way to the moment after the bullet left the barrel. If only she could see his face, the size of his pupils, what words his mouth had formed. Had he gaped in surprise, laughed, or cried.

The man in the film is probably guilty, but that is only half of the picture. Murdering Molly makes him a killer; his reaction determines what kind of killer.

Agnes rewinds and plays the footage in slow motion. The man zips from one position to the next as he moves through the turnstiles and farther down the station, towards the escalators. When he has left the picture frame, she rewinds the film again. After the third replay, she leaves it running at normal speed.

Ten minutes pass before the security staff snatch their radios from their belts, spring into activity, and stop people from passing. People grimace and raise their mobile phones.

“That’s when the alert was sent out,” Gren says. “The station was shut down. It looks like John never showed up.”

Lena crosses her arms and sits back, still intent on the screen. “Have someone with good eyesight look through the tape again. Search for any sign of John, and get a usable image of the other man. I want to know where he went. Have we got footage from the platform?”

“Their camera up there is broken.” Gren makes an apologetic face.

“You can’t be serious. Who the hell is–” Lena raises a hand before Gren frowns at her. “Never mind,” she says. “It’s only ten minutes. They must be able to work out which trains stopped at the station during that time.”

“Probably,” Gren agrees.

Lena turns to Agnes. “Get them to send us the footage from all those trains. And tell them to do it fast. Agnes?”

Agnes flinches as Lena touches her arm. “What?”

“Are you all right?” Lena asks.

“Sorry.” Agnes shakes her head. “I was distracted. Are we going looking again?”

“We haven’t seen the other recording yet,” Lena says.

“Oh. Of course.” Agnes changes the disc, and the image flickers and changes into the interior of a train car distorted by the wide-angle lens.

Lena leans closer. The first film was key to finding the killer; this footage will tell her about John. She should prioritize finding the presumed killer, but she cannot exorcise the image of John from her thoughts. Frantic, alone, and armed.

“Where the hell is he?” Lena asks, squinting at the fish-eye picture.

“At the far end.” Agnes points to the screen. “There.”

Lena shakes her head. “This is rubbish. How are we meant to see what happens?”

Agnes fast-forwards a few minutes. “The tech team said they’d enhanced the sequence. Here we are.”

The picture centres and zooms in on a man in the distance. Large and restless pixels resolve into a sharper picture: two groups of blue seats, pale green walls, advertisements for mobile phones above the backs of the seats. The image quality is good, but the light is too bright: everything is cast in a bluish glare, making the scene look as if it were filmed in an icy hospital.

Lena recognizes John straight away.

He is sitting by the window, his face blank, seemingly oblivious of the three men in the booth next to his. Lena can easily read their glances and their collective poise. Body language is as subtle as a megaphone when you know what signals to look for. She sees what will come next. For a moment, she is almost overcome with the urge to shout a warning.

The trains stops, and the men make their move: One moment they sit in the adjacent booth, then two of them stand in front of John while the third keeps watch, scowling at the other passengers and blocking Lena’s view.

Agnes reads off her notepad. “We’re not sure what happens here, but witness statements indicate that they tried to rob John. One witness said he saw a knife and heard threats. That’s all we know.”

Lena glances at the younger officer and wonders when Agnes found the time to read up on the witness statements. Probably when Lena looked away for a second. The woman is uncanny efficiency dressed in a uniform.

The men who moved in on John shuffle around and look over their shoulders. Lena can sense the tension. Their robbery is not going to plan.

Without warning, a plume of dark streaks appears on the advertisement on the wall above John.

Gren points at the lines. “What’s that?”

“I’m not sure,” Agnes says. “Perhaps some kind of discolouration from the digital enhancement.”

“No.” Lena shakes her head. “It’s blood.”

She read through as much as she could of the report on her way to the city. Notes on the crime scene described it as ‘soaked’. Watching the red lines droop, she wonders how much of the blood was John’s.

The scene changes in a flurry of movement. Two of the men move away from the booth while one remains bent over John with his back turned to the camera. The two men run out of the image and, Lena guesses, the train.

The last man looms over John, then doubles over and falls on his back between the two booths. Graceless but fast, John pounces on the fallen man and holds a knife to his face.

After a moment, John turns his head and looks directly at the camera, and for eight long seconds, he meets the eyes of Lena, Agnes and Gren.

“Bloody hell,” Gren whispers. “He knows he’s being filmed. He’s looking right at us. What the hell?”

Lena is about to agree when John turns back to the man and slices his nose open.

“Christ,” Agnes gasps.

Blood fountains from the wound and stains the nearby seats. The injured man twists manically on the floor, but John pins him down and leans down, his head close to the man’s ear.

“He’s talking,” Lena says hoarsely; her throat is parched. “I think he’s whispering.” She would sacrifice days of her lifespan in return for knowing what John is saying.

John stands up, takes his bag, and walks out of the train car. Were it not for his bloodied shirt, he could have been on his way to work. But Lena knows that John is on his way to a storage depot, where he will assault and tie down a colleague so hard the man nearly lost limbs. John will make threats so vile Lena could not coax the details out of his former friend. And now John is gone.

Again.

“Stop the tape.” Lena presses the heels of her hands to the sides of her head. If she needed any confirmation that John is not their regular grieving relative, this is it. He is violent and callous, but calculating. His gaze has left her with a cold knot in her stomach: he had looked like an animal, stripped of compassion and hesitation.

The psychology department would have a field day with him. For all John’s composedness, his actions are bold and irreversible. He knows the police is watching, and he does not care. The man is a burning fuse. When the detonation comes, John would be far past saving. As would more people.

“Any more news from the patrols?” Lena asks.

“Not yet,” Gren says. “It’s only a matter of time, though. John is leaving a strong trail.”

“Not strong enough.” Lena rises and turns to Agnes. “Call the lab and make sure they work on getting better pictures fast. Tell them to call me as soon as the image of the second man is on our system. John is a loose cannon heading for a disaster, and all we do is let him slip away. Gren?”

“Yes?”

“About that helicopter?”

*

John

John’s thrust with the axe is not precise, but hard enough to split Mick’s cheek open. Mick stumbles backwards into the flat, trips on a low table, falls over and smashes the wooden tabletop in half. A small revolver falls from his hand and lands on the floor.

The door is partially open, still barred by the security chain. John sees the other man move inside the flat, towards the door, hoping to slam it shut in John’s face.

John lifts the axe and hammers down on the security chain. The blade effortlessly cuts through the metal, and he shoulders the door wide open.

On John’s left, Mick struggles to disentangle himself from the ruined table. White bone shows through the wound on his cheek. On John’s right, the other man is backing away, one arm raised in defence while his other hand clutches a glass bottle by its neck. The man’s eyes are wide, his skin pasty with sweat. The bottle quivers wildly in the man’s grip.

John shuts the door, locks it from the inside, and turns to Mick, who tries to sit up, cursing and spitting blood. Before Mick can rise to his feet, John picks up a toaster from the floor, raises it high, and slams it into the side of Mick’s head.

Mick slumps back and lies still. John drops the toaster, turns around, and faces his target.

The man has backed up to the wall. Shaking and whimpering, he holds the bottle in front of him as if it were a sword. When he realizes he has nowhere to escape, he charges at John, his bottle held high.

John watches the man come towards him. The attack is savage but desperate, and the man’s aim is off. He sidesteps the swing and drives the butt of his axe deep into the man’s groin.

The man’s mouth drops open. The bottle flies from his hands and lands on a stained couch. He tries to move away but buckles and collapses to the floor, gasping for breath.

John crouches and drives a knee deep into the man’s chest, pinning him down. He raises the axe in the air and aims.

The man splutters and flails with his arms. “I can pay,” he gasps. “I should’ve paid by now, I know, and I will. Got almost all of the money, just a few grand missing. I would never play Tom. He knows it’s true. Ask him.”

John says nothing. The axe is perfectly aligned; one quick twist of his arm and his hunt will be over.

“Or is it Marco?” the man rants on. “But I’ve paid him. He’s got his money, right? I made the swap last week. No, you work for Tom, don’t you? Call him. Tell him I’ll make good. I just need another day. Something got in the way, is all. Shit got ugly yesterday.”

John is silent.

“Real ugly,” the man continues, his words spilling out as he bargains for mercy. “I was fucking blitzed, totally loaded, and I got it in my head to try doors. Some idiots don’t lock them, you know?”

“Go on,” John says.

“I find an open door,” the man croaks. “I go in, and I find this bitch hiding in her bedroom. When I pulled my piece and took her bag, she clings to it. So I shoot her. Fucking dumb, I know, but I needed the cash. I needed to pay Tom. That’s it. Had to get the money.”

John finds himself at a watershed. He has to destroy the squirming anomaly under him, obliterate this source of injustice, but the axe does not fall. Hesitation has checked his final attack. His imagined chain of actions is incomplete.

He may have found the instrument that took Molly from him, but he has not located the hand that guided it. Another link in the chain beckons from farther away: The man who sold Molly’s murderer the drugs. The finger on the trigger. The ultimate prey.

John lowers the axe and scans the room. Crumpled clothes, bins brimming with empty fast-food boxes, mounds of cigarette packs next to the broken table. A sleeping bag on a foam mattress. Towers of DVD movies on the floor. A wide flat-screen TV balancing on a small fridge. Glossy movie posters nailed to the worn wallpaper. Cigarette butts pressed into the vent of a radiator. A mobile phone on the floor. Cheap boxes of chocolate on a low table by the window.

John opens the lid of one of the boxes. Inside are dozens of small transparent bags filled with yellow powder.

He turns back to the man under him. Mick does not move; his head rests in a pool of blood. It is a complication. He has not expected the need to prolong his search, and there are those who want to stop him.

In moments, he knows the steps he must take to truly end his chase. Plans and options arrange themselves in his mind. Primarily, he needs more information, and he needs to move.

Slowly, he lowers the axe.

“Bloody hell,” the man on the floor gasps, then laughs hysterically. “I thought you’d kill me. You know I’m honest, right? Tom trusts me. He can always trust me.”

“If you scream,” John says, “or make any noise, I will cleave your face in half. Do you understand?”

“I got it. I got it, man. Do you want cash? Over there, the yellow bag, under the bed. Take the shoebox too; that alone is worth all I owe him and then some.”

“I need information,” John says. “Not money.”

“You want what?”

“Tell me about Tom. His full name and his address. Everything you know.”

“I thought you meant – man, I can’t tell you that. You don’t know Tom. He’d kill me.”

John drives the axe into the floor right next to the man’s head and raises it again.

“*Stop. Please.*” Tears flood the man’s eyes. “Jesus fuck. I’m going to die. He’ll torture me, and then he’ll kill me.”

“Tom’s full name,” John says. “Addresses, phone numbers, names of his friends.” The axe hovers in the air above the man’s face.

“Shit,” the man whimpers and then speaks.

After a few minutes, John knows all he needs to know. He is almost ready to move on.

But he is not finished here. His next step will not bring him closer to his new goal, but his quest for balance requires it. A part to fit in the greater picture. The man under John’s knee might be a tool, but he is part of the disturbance John looks to quiet.

There is a bill to settle. An anguish for an agony.

“Keep quiet,” John says and unzips his bag.

“Right. I’m quiet, I’m quiet.”

“Close your eyes.”

“What?” the man stutters. “Why should I close my eyes? I don’t want to close my eyes. I’m not – hey, what’s that? You’re going to paint something? No, that’s – *oh fuck, no, don’t*–”

*

John

John puts his equipment back in his bag and looks at Molly's murderer. At last, the man's eyes are closed. He will not give any more excuses or tell more lies.

He examines the phone. Half charged, no security code required. He pockets it, continues to search the room, and finds under the bed a green canvas bag and a large shoebox. Kneeling down, he pulls the shoebox out and opens the lid. Once he has inspected the contents, he pulls out the bag, unzips it, and looks inside. A distant radio murmurs a weather forecast while he thinks.

His own bag is full, so he pulls out his bedroll to make room for the box. After today, he will not need to sleep, but the contents of the box and the rest of the items he has brought may prove useful. At the bottom of the shoebox are three folded printouts of web pages. He leafs through the papers and puts them in his pocket.

Last into the bag goes an advertisement for a local pizzeria. On its back, he has noted down key details about the man who supplied Molly's killer with drugs: Names, addresses, telephone numbers, descriptions.

John closes the bag and leaves the flat. One more task. One more chase. A different breed of prey, more dangerous, but less prepared.

And he knows where it nests.

*

Lena

The helicopter whips up a small cyclone of snow as Lena lands on a meadow close to John's countryside property. They are near a narrow, winding road that cuts between barns, stables and fenced fields.

Before she left the city headquarters, Gren learned that residents near John's cabin had teamed up and cleared the roads as much as they could. Some farmers had brought tractors with ploughs and opened up kilometres. That meant cars could reach the house, but Lena insisted on going in the helicopter; she had wasted enough time already.

While she was in the helicopter, Gren called. Two words into the conversation, she could tell from his tone that he was about to give her bad news, and she was right: Lena was no longer in charge of the hunt of the second man, now also the presumed murderer. That task had been transferred to another detective at another department.

It had happened for administrative purposes, Gren assured her three times over. She knew he was lying, or had been lied to.

When Lena did not blow up over the phone, Gren sounded surprised. She offered a small rant to suggest she was upset, but in truth, the decision helped her: it meant she could turn her full attention to John. In practise, she already had.

Lena told Gren there was no need for backup when she searched John's house. Most likely, she argued, John would not be there, and if the infrared sweep hinted at anything bigger than a rat inside the house, they would land far away and wait for reinforcements.

"It's possible he's there," Lena admitted over the phone when talking to Gren. "The buses go straight to the area from where his girlfriend lived. But unless he's got a car or a ride waiting to pick him up, he'd have to walk. All bus drivers along those routes have been briefed. They'd call in straight away if they saw him."

"I'm not sure," Gren said.

Lena wondered what Gren had been unsure about: John's whereabouts or Lena's judgement.

“Even if he went by car,” Lena continued, “the roads weren’t ploughed last night. Besides, he must know we’re aware of the property. Isolating himself there makes no sense.”

“Do you really think John is that rational?” Gren asked.

“In his own way, yes. And he doesn’t want to be caught. That profile doesn’t rhyme with John at all.”

Gren caved in, but only in part: He authorised Lena to take a look around, but she had to wait for backup before she went close to the house, regardless of what the sweep found.

“I’ll arrange the search warrant,” he said. “And you will wait before going in.” His command came out as a half-plea.

“I won’t go close,” Lena promised.

Twenty-five minutes later, stepping out of the helicopter while the rotor blades spin like a misty disc above her head, she wonders why Gren forgot to define ‘close’. It was his loss and her gain.

Three sweeps with the infrared scanner before they landed had not shown any sign of life in the house. Lena had also had time for an aerial view of the property. A small house, a tiny outhouse, and a small overgrown garden surrendered to the whims of nature. A thick forest surrounded the house. The larger road ran some hundred metres away, while the road leading up to the house was so narrow it was more a big path.

“I’ve been called back to the airport,” the pilot calls to Lena when she steps out. “You’ll have to ride back with the backup. Sorry.”

Lena nods and jogs away from the helicopter. Seconds later, she is alone.

The air nips at her face; the blizzard is over, but the temperature has dropped. At least the air is fresh and clean, carrying the scent of woodlands and horses even at this Arctic temperature. When the helicopter has shot away in the grey sky, she looks around to get her bearings.

The field on which she stands is the size of a soccer field. Patches of woods and boulders left behind by the inland ice break up the rolling hills. To the east and south are dense copses of pine trees. There are no people or moving cars nearby. A few kilometres from where she stands, beyond private woodland and large villas with sprawling grounds, is the home of the Swedish royal family. People like John are rare in these parts of Stockholm.

She turns east. John's house is located behind a small forest at the other end of the field. The wind is picking up. Pulling up the lapel of her jacket, she walks towards the trees, trying to tread where the blanket of snow is the thinnest.

When she is halfway across the field, she calls Agnes. "I'm near John's property," she says. "Gren wants me to be a good girl and stay away from the house."

"Will you do that?" Agnes asks. "Please, take care."

Under other, less disastrous circumstances, Lena would have smiled. Agnes is starting to know her well. "I won't go too close," Lena says. "I promised."

"We're at the bridge," Agnes says. "The roads aren't good, but they're better than I expected. We should be with you in about twelve minutes. Did the sweep show anything?"

Lena shakes her head as she walks. Twelve minutes. Not fifteen, not ten. Twelve. Knowing Agnes, she will probably arrive exactly then. "We got nothing," she says. "If John's in the house, he's either dead or hiding in the fridge."

"Be careful."

"Call me when you get here." She hangs up.

Lena jogs towards the forest; it is quicker and makes her warmer. She wants to see the cabin now. Not that she expects the small house to hide a lead, but she cannot help imagine that this place holds a secret, some clue that will vanish like a bubble unless caught in time.

Once at the forest, she barely breaks pace. Branches flash by as she runs, ducking and twisting through the rock-riddled maze of boulders and trees, watching out for holes in the ground, roots, patches of ice, anything that could trip her and break her legs. She crawls over a large rock, slides down its side, runs sideways between two trees, and then she is there, next to the small outhouse she saw from the air.

Resting her hands on her knees, she stops and breathes hard. The house looks ordinary enough: Red-painted timber, probably almost a hundred years old. Low, square and quaint, complete with large snowflakes coasting down onto its roof.

It has three windows on the wall facing her, all covered by white wooden shutters. Halfway between the outhouse and house, in the middle of

a clearing, is an old well, visible above the snow only as a circle of round stones and grey mortar. It is a perfect Christmas card.

Before Lena left the headquarters, a colleague who had found building plans had informed her that the house has two rooms: One main room and a small kitchen. The small outhouse hides a modernized bathroom, if something built in the late seventies counts as modern.

Beyond the house is a short stretch of trees, behind them more fields and boulders. She hears no sounds except the soft rustle of branches and the distant barking of a dog. Three minutes have passed since she spoke with Agnes.

Lena flexes her fingers, sets her jaw, and draws her pistol. The plastic grip feels like heavy ice in her palms. For a moment, she stands still next to the outhouse and steers her attention away from the gun. It is a tool, nothing more. A dead weight, unthinking, unconscious. She has to focus on the task at hand. Inspect, think, move on.

“Come on,” she whispers to herself.

Willing herself into action, she moves along the wall of the small outhouse and looks through its tiny window. No one inside. Wooden walls, sink, toilet, old bar of yellow soap. A thick wilted book balancing on the windowsill. She tilts her head to read the title, but the cover has been torn off.

She turns to the house. The shutters cover the windows almost entirely, leaving only a vertical crack. Someone inside could spy on her through the slit, so she advances crouching, staying in what she hopes is an angle obscured by the shutters.

Once she is at a corner, she pauses next to a large plastic barrel under the gutter and moves towards the door, keeping low to stay under the windows. At the door, she pauses again to listen. Nothing. No footprints on the single step in front of the narrow door. A thick string of snow balances on the handle.

She looks over her shoulder. There is no sign of life except for a crow watching her from a naked branch high above the house.

Breathing slowly, she studies the building. If Gren was able to read her thoughts at that moment, he would think she was distressed, but she is certain the house is vacant: There is a sense of hollowness to the location, a lack of life. A missing presence.

Still, she wants to look inside. There might be a clue to what John is doing.

The lock on the door is simple; the locksmith coming with the backup will open it in the blink of an eye, and she herself can probably pry the door open if she found a tool lying around the yard. But if she does, she risks having to explain her actions to Gren. It is better to wait.

She checks the time. Five minutes until Agnes said she would arrive.

Her gun pointed at the ground, she retraces her steps and walks over to the well. Way back, before the island changed from rural nowhere to sanctuary for the wealthy, the water supply would have been used by the house's residents. The circle of mortared stones is less than a metre across, and its edge reaches only up to her knees.

Two rusty boards of corrugated steel held in place by a large stone cover the opening. The crow caws and flies to another branch as she leans down and pushes at the steel boards. They shift easily.

"A quick look can't hurt," she mumbles under her breath.

She slides one of the boards off the well, leans forward to look down, and stumbles back as the well screams in her face.

*

John

John runs in the weak light of Miriam’s lantern. He expects the ground to vanish any moment, vaporized by the sadistic whims that govern this place. The trail flickers in and out of his vision; unless he concentrates, he will lose sight of it.

Surrounding him are trees, majestic and old, rising from the thick carpet of bracken and moss. Above, their branches tangle to form a ceiling of countless dark leaves. A slow wind rustles the woods, brushing against him and whispering near-words. The air is wet and cold, but warmer than it has ever been since he woke up on the ice. Even though he can see only a few steps ahead, he senses the vastness of the forest.

Thorns and twigs tear and swipe at him, leaving him with cuts and smarting bruises, but he has momentum, a sense of direction. He is a lodestone heading towards its pull. Miriam said the exit is close. Once he is out, all will make sense.

A strong breeze washes through the forest and makes the foliage flutter. This time, it carries more than a whisper; intertwined with the gust is a distant shriek rising and falling in a dissonant pattern.

“No, you don’t,” John says and runs faster.

The path continues uphill. The wind grows stronger but does not dissipate the fog that curls around the tree trunks. Keeping his eyes on Miriam’s lantern, he forces his way through bushes and crashes through the dense undergrowth with his arms raised to protect his face. The scents of the forest, deep and musky, make it hard to breathe.

As he leans against a tree to catch his breath, his legs finally give in, and he falls down on the ground next to the base of a massive oak. He tries to stand up but slumps back down again.

Miriam runs up to his side and kneels down. “What’s going on?”

“My legs,” John wheezes. “They’re killing me.”

“This is not the time.” She tries to lift him, but he is too heavy for her to shift.

A new sensation comes to John. “I smell something,” he says.

“I don’t.” Miriam sniffs and shrugs.

“It’s familiar.” John takes a deep breath and searches for a word. “Spices. No, that’s not right. It’s perfume. Her perfume.”

Miriam looks alarmed. “John, let’s go.”

“Wait.” He peers into the murky forest. “There’s someone out there.”

“Run.” Miriam’s tone is panicked. “Please, John. Just run.”

John shakes his head and breathes in. The scent is a portent, a ghost waiting for a physical shape. Features swirl in his mind, and he manages to mould them into a coherent picture. A picture of a person. A woman.

“She’s close,” John says.

“John, for the love of–” Miriam looks over John’s shoulder, flinches, and steps back. “Oh, fuck.”

“What?” John asks. Sick of the incessant games, he lets go of the image in his head and turns around.

Standing behind him, wearing that lopsided, singular, holy smile, is Molly.

*

Lena

The furious roar rises from the hole in the ground like an anguished plea.

Her teeth gritted, Lena throws herself backwards and aims her gun at the air above the well, prepared to fire at whatever unthinkable nightmare she has unleashed.

The scream goes on unabated. She pushes herself farther away from the well, trying to hold her gun and cover her ears at the same time, but the snow holds her in place. Blackness creeps into view like curtains closing a performance; she is being constricted by terror and shock. As if sensing her helplessness, the relentless wail rises in pitch and wakes the ghouls that usually stalk her by night.

She blinks –

– and she is back in the house, in the chaos.

On the wall is the projected film, a tapestry of horror she has tried and failed to forget. Noises invade her: sirens and protests, screams and tortured whimpering, furniture breaking in the adjacent room where her colleague fights another man. In front of her stands the suspect, defiant and indignant, scorning and ranting. No hint of remorse.

She relives the fury that crashed through her that night: a quick tide of adrenaline and, underneath, the sensation of sudden company. Her thoughts run parallel with those of another entity evoked by revulsion and unrestrained hate. She was not alone in her head.

When she faltered for words to scream at the suspect, the alien, storming presence inside took over. It did not lack imagination, and it knew exactly what to say.

“Do you know what happens to paedophiles in prison?” she asked, lowering her voice. “I have first-hand sources.” In truth, she had not known. She had never heard any stories. The words she spoke had not been hers.

“Fuck you,” the man sneered, still screaming. “Get out.”

“They’ll come for you at night. First they’ll gag you; then they get the cable ties out. One is all it takes.”

“Shut up.”

Lena continued, glee creeping into her voice. “They pull it as tight as they can, right at the base of your ball sack. Then they knock you out.”

“Shut up.”

“The guards know what’s happening, but they don’t care. They know you deserve it.”

“Lying cunt,” the man roared. “Get the fuck out of my house.”

“When you wake up, the surgery is already over. There’s nothing left but a plastic tube and a scar.”

The man hesitated. His eyes narrowed.

“And that’s just the start,” she said, grinning widely. “After that, it gets really bad.”

Silent, she stared at him, willing him to move, begging him to fight.

And the man moved.

Once again, she feels the convulsions of the gun, the metallic smacks of bullets parting from their casings to twist through the air. Her fingers have a will of their own; her thoughts are far behind, racing behind much stronger and faster impulses.

The first pull of the trigger had been reflexive: She had been so close to firing that a tremor was all it took.

The second had been in shock. Had she been in control of herself, she would have stopped, but when her bubble of astonishment popped, vengeance waited outside.

The third shot had been in determination: This subhuman creature would never return. She could and would banish him to permanent silence. The means were in her hands, and she used them with the casual concentration of a carpenter driving down a nail.

But the fourth shot had been different.

Without warning, the need to cause more damage took hold of her. Killing the man was not enough; he deserved to experience the same level of suffering displayed on the wall behind him. But her target was already damaged beyond repair, so she concentrated on the pleasure of destruction, the sweet pang of bringing pain and ruin to the man’s flesh and bone.

Laughing under her breath, she had felt a profound, sensual stab of joy as she pulled the trigger and with great precision sent a bullet through the

man’s brain. And so, she had crossed the line and become what she loathed more than anything.

A bad cop.

It is the ghost of that particular shot that still wakes her at night. Gasping for breath, it jerks her upright, nods in recognition, and fades away. She remains behind, sweating and famished for the guilt that always fails to come.

Every time that happens, before she can sleep again, she touches her own face to make sure she is not smiling the way she had done in the house.

*

Lena

The moment passes, and Lena is back in the yard, staring down the barrel of her gun at the well. Apart from a faint hum, all is quiet again.

It must have been the wind: There had to be a passage down in the well, some form of a natural duct. When she removed the corrugated steel boards, the wind had torn unhindered through the channel and caused the piercing screech.

The crow looks down on her from its branch, its gaze speculative and condescending.

“Jesus Christ,” she whispers and lies back, resting her head on the snow. Noticing the gun in her hand, she tosses the weapon away. The sky above is a white ocean sprinkling its jagged drops over her face. It is snowing again.

She thinks of Agnes. Caring and trusting, she had listened to her amended story and believed her. She should have told her the truth. The constant lying and secrecy are erasing Lena’s sanity.

Her phone rings. She starts, makes her trembling hands find her phone, and looks at the display. It is Agnes. Lena takes the call and realises she hears cars nearby.

“We’re almost at the house,” Agnes says. “Where are you?”

Lena stands up and quickly picks up her gun. “Meet me at the front door.”

She returns to the house and waits. The flashback is a raw wound; she wants to sit down, bury her face in her hands and shut out the world, but she must look professional, or at least operational. Agnes is relying on her.

The slams of car doors echo through the forest. After a minute, Agnes appears, trudging through the snow along the road that leads up to the house. Six other officers follow in her wake, five men and one woman. Behind them walks a man in orange trousers and a green insulated jacket. The officers are tense; rumours about John and what he has done are flying wild.

Agnes looks around the yard and turns to Lena. The young officer could pull off the impressive feat of scowling without a shadow of a frown.

“I haven’t touched the house,” Lena says. “But I will, now that you’re here.” She bangs on the door with her fist. “Police. Open up.”

No answer. Lena points at the man in the green jacket and jerks her thumb at the door behind her. “Get going. It’s not getting any warmer.”

The man blows his cheeks and lowers his toolbox down on the step. “Yes, I’m the locksmith, thanks for asking.”

“You don’t look like an undercover officer to me, so who else would you be?” Lena shakes her tousled hair and pulls it back up in a tighter ponytail. Agnes looks pained; she too must be freezing. Hopefully the locksmith is not an amateur.

“Any news?” Lena asks Agnes.

“No sign of John or the other man,” Agnes answers, “and no incidents that point to either of them. They’re working on the recording at the station. Oh, and Gren is getting busy. Details about the case have leaked to the press, and the media is hounding him. He’s been ordered to brief the senior command later today.”

“So we’re on our own.” Lena turns to the locksmith. “Is the door open yet?”

The locksmith mutters something under his breath while he works on the lock.

“What was that?” Lena asks.

“I said,” he replies slowly, “I’ll be done in a few seconds.” A sharp clunk sounds from the lock. “There. It’s open. You’re welcome.”

As soon as the locksmith moves out of the way, Lena walks up to the door, pulls her gun, and switches her torch on. She closes her hand around the gun’s grip. “On three,” she says.

The other officers move in closer to Lena and draw their pistols. Lena counts down, swings the door open, and peers inside.

The door opens to a square room that takes up most of the space in the house. On her left is a cluttered working bench that runs almost the entire length of the room. Under the bench are small paint buckets, a toolbox and a pile of neatly stacked unused canvases still in their plastic wrappings.

On her right is a large and old orange sofa, and next to it a small table with a sound system. A stack of CDs balances precariously on a speaker. Under the table stands a hot air radiator. On the opposite wall is a narrow door, which, if she remembers correctly, leads to a miniature kitchen.

Next to the door, along the wall, are three deep rows of paintings. Bright colours hint under the sheet thrown over the canvases. The air smells heavily of oil paint and solvents. The cracks between the wooden shutters form vertical lines of light on the walls. A damp silence rests inside the house.

While the officers fan out across the room, Lena walks over to the bench and shines her torch on its contents. Glass jars brim with worn brushes, plastic bottles with acrylic paint, piled boxes with oil colour tubes. Scalpels, rulers and scourers. Mounds of old newspapers, most of them cut to pieces. Enough sticky tape, pencils and erasers to supply a small school.

No TV, no game consoles. A houseful of colours, creations and music. John's little refuge from the world. By and large, it is an extension of John's flat, only more peaceful. When she realises the tools on the workbench are centred around a wide canvas, she turns her light to the painting and looks closer.

The motif is of the back of a man walking away from a calm lake in the foreground and towards a tower-like silhouette that blocks out a setting sun. Between the lake and the tower, right in the man's path, is a mass of trees with long interweaving branches. The sky is a wild blend of deep browns and stark yellows. A depiction of a dusk the like of which Lena has never seen.

Underneath the motif, almost concealed by the thick layer of colours, is a collage of newspaper clippings. She squints and tries to read some of them, but the oil paint has blurred the words.

"The guy's a real fanatic," an officer behind Lena says.

"He was," Lena replies. "I'm pretty sure he won't return to these." Not if he continues down his current path of choice. Only John did not choose it, she reminds herself; someone else started John's downward spiral.

She looks at Agnes and nods at the second door. "Kitchen."

Lena and Agnes move to each side of the kitchen door. When Agnes nods, Lena opens the door and glances around the corner.

No one inside. The open cupboard holds a few tins of food, instant coffee, tomato sauce and three boxes of dry cat food. She pulls out the drawers and finds mismatched cutlery and tableware. A coffee cup rests in the sink. The bar fridge hides a bar of chocolate and a package of hot dogs.

One of the officers looks in and makes a disgusted face. “I can tell he’s more a painter than a chef.”

“The only thing we can tell,” Lena says and slams the fridge shut, “is that John’s still out there. We’ll go back to the office and – hold on.” Her phone buzzes.

“Lena.”

“Gren here. Have there been any developments?”

“If there’d been, I would’ve called. We’ve got nothing other than more proof that John really likes to paint.”

“Walls or paintings?”

“The latter. We’re going back now. What did you want?”

“The lab got a usable image from the footage of the second suspect. We put it out on the system and sent off priority alerts to greater Stockholm. The security manager at Vällingby called two minutes after we sent out the alert.”

“What did he say?” Lena clenches the phone hard in her hand. If they can find the murderer, sooner or later they will locate John too.

“One on the manager’s staff recognized the man straight away. The suspect has been seen around Hässelby Gård lately. That’s two stops away from Vällingby, towards the end of the line.”

“I know where it is. Have they started to search yet?”

“All patrols in the area have been alerted,” Gren says. “We’ll talk to the staff around the station as soon as we can get more people out there.”

“Call me if something happens. Before you remind me, I know I’m no longer leading that case, but he’s our key to John.”

“You still think so?”

“I know it. Make sure the suspect doesn’t board a train, or I will strangle someone.”

“If he’s out there, he won’t leave that way.”

“I’m going to Hässelby Gård.”

“Understood. I’ll call if I hear more. Please remember–”

“Gren,” Lena snaps.

“Just keep it in mind.”

Lena ends the call. The other officers look at her and wait. They think they are wasting time in John’s picturesque, freezing painting studio.

“Right,” Lena says. “John lives near Vällingby. The other man has been spotted in the same area. If John knows that man’s identity, there’s a chance John is near.”

“How would John know whom to look for?” an officer asks.

“He’s got a photo,” Lena says. “And just after the murder, witnesses said John was asking around for a man dressed in clothes that match those of the suspect. We knew that when we saw the footage from the station. My guess is John’s somewhere between Vällingby and the end of the line.”

The officer shakes his head. “That’s a weak lead.”

“It’s still a lead,” Lena says, “and we’re using it. I’ll do one last check here, and then we’re off. Agnes?”

“Yes?”

“Go to your car, check the reports from that area, and let me know if something out of the ordinary has happened. People might have noticed John. If nothing else, his clothes could be bloodied.”

“There’ll be hundreds of posts,” Agnes says. “It’s the weekend. What do you want me to look for more specifically?”

“Anything that catches your eye. I’ll go through the list myself once I get to your car.”

When Agnes has left, Lena bends down and peers underneath the sofa. A layer of dust and an old paintbrush. She stands back up and chews on her lips. If John has any secrets hidden here, she cannot find them. The house is a cold trail. All the paintings here were part of the John who existed before his girlfriend was murdered. The John they are searching for now is another creature entirely.

Lena’s phone rings. She looks at the screen and blinks when she sees Agnes’s name. Agnes’s car is ten seconds away; there was no reason to call. Outside the house, a car starts.

Lena takes the call. “What’s going on?” she asks.

“John’s been spotted in Hässelby.” Agnes’s voice is almost drowned out by the growl of her car’s engine.

Lena runs out of the house. Brushing past the other officers, she slams John’s door shut and sprints down the road, towards where the other officers have parked their cars. Behind her, her colleagues scramble to catch up.

She reaches Agnes's car, throws the door open, and jumps into the passenger seat. Two officers get in the backseat a moment before Agnes accelerates. The other police cars start behind Agnes's car.

Lena throws her gloves on the floor and fumbles for her phone. "Tell me."

"An elderly woman called in to the local police station," Agnes says. "She met a man at the front door of her block. She thought he acted strange, so she got worried."

"When?"

"She just called. An officer realized the description matched the one from the train footage, down to the bag he carries. They got back to the old woman and told her to stay indoors. John apparently went into the block of flats where she lives."

"Perfect." Lena flicks on the heater; her hands are numb with cold. "Let's hope he's still there."

"Yes." Agnes turns onto a larger road and speeds up. She looks troubled.

"What's wrong?" Lena asks.

Agnes grimaces. "The woman called five minutes ago, but it's been over an hour since she saw John."

"What?"

"She wasn't sure it was necessary to trouble the police, so she waited until she got too worried. At least she called. The patrols are already there, and underground train security is keeping an eye out."

"Fuck." Lena slams the dashboard, closes her eyes, and opens them.

"Perhaps–"

"Just drive."

Lena is silent while the cars rip down the white road. One whole hour. A wealth of precious seconds gone to waste. John could be anywhere. Agnes thinks John might be lingering, but he will have vanished, turned into smoke again.

The other officers are blindfolded by textbook neatness; they think John's actions click to the grid of reason and predictability. She wishes she could tell them that she knows what is going through his head, although if she tried, she would flag herself for permanent desk duty. Or hospitalisation.

When her phone rings, Lena almost presses her thumb through the brittle thing. A number from the headquarters. “Franke,” she says.

“Is this Lena Franke?” A male voice. Loud voices in the background.

“Still here,” Lena says. “Who is this?”

“This is Patrick Rahm. Krister Gren put me through to you.”

Lena forces herself to stay calm. “How nice of him. How can I help? I’m busy.”

“Gren said you’re in charge of the investigation of John Andersson.”

“Correct.” Her pulse begins to drum in her ears.

The man clears his throat. “We responded to a tip-off from a woman who saw a man with matching clothes. We’re at the address right now.”

“Tell me you have him,” Lena says before she can stop herself. “Please, tell me you got John.”

A short silence. “I’m afraid not,” Patrick says. “We’re pretty sure he’s been here, but–”

Lena wants to scream. They are late again. “Make sure no one touches anything,” she says. “Start searching the area. John can still be nearby. The same goes for the murder suspect; he’s been sighted in the district.”

“You’re talking about the man in the pictures we received this morning, right?” Patrick asks.

“Yes, he’s the presumed murderer of–”

“He’s here. We got him.”

Lena falters from a sudden vertigo as the information sinks in. The sound of the siren on the car’s roof turns into a single, drawn-out note. She wonders if she is imagining the words; perhaps she has grown so desperate to catch the men that she is hallucinating.

“Repeat,” Lena says after a moment.

“We have the suspect, and also another man who was in the same flat. We’ve secured a large stash of drugs, too.”

“Take them both to the station in Vällingby.”

“I thought there was someone else running the investigation of–”

“There is,” Lena says, “but right now, I’m talking to you, and I’m your superior. Find a room and keep the men there. We won’t be long.” Agnes flashes the fingers on one of her hands three times. “Fifteen minutes,” Lena adds.

“We can’t take them in,” Patrick says.

“Will you bloody listen,” Lena shouts at the phone. “I haven’t got time to run through the whole procedure. I’ll deal with the paperwork later. Those men have critical information, and I need it.”

“It’s not that,” Patrick says hesitantly. “One of the men – not the suspect, but the other one – he must be taken to hospital. They’re rolling him out now.”

Lena goes cold. A thousand visions invade her mind. “Why?”

“The paramedics think his neck is fractured. And then some. His face is a mess.”

“What of the suspect?” Lena asks. “Please tell me he’s alive.”

“He’s alive, all right.” Silence. “But he probably wishes he wasn’t.”

“Just tell me what the hell’s wrong, will you?” Lena forces herself to keep her voice level. She ignores Agnes’s concerned glance.

“I’m not sure how to explain,” Patrick says. “You’d better see for yourself.”

*

John

John sits at the back of a bus and watches the suburbs pass by.

Moving at half its normal speed, the bus negotiates roads cleared by salt, warm underground conduits and lumbering ploughs. Beyond the snowfall are the soft outlines of cars covered by crisp layers of white.

The route takes him through low blocks of flats and patches of small, one-storey villas. He passes large leafless trees, ruler-straight hedges, and staring snowmen. Trees filled with strings of lights glow like clusters of stars. The air inside the bus is hot and humid, but outside, the temperature is falling.

The bus will take him from Stockholm's western districts to the vast and closely huddled blocks of flats of the northern suburbs. Three other people are on the bus. All of them face the other way. The driver barely glanced at him and the ticket he bought from a corner shop. Everyone's mind is on the cold.

On his way to the bus stop, he stopped at a phone booth and called Tom's home landline number. A first step to find out where Tom is.

The person who answered the phone was not John's target, but a woman who curtly informed John that she was not Tom's damned secretary and added that John could try calling Tom's office or call again later.

He didn't know what company Tom works for, so he looked out the window and suggested a name that rhymed on a nearby supermarket. The woman asked what he was talking about and gave him the name of Tom's business.

"Thanks," John said. "You've been very helpful."

"Moron," the woman said and hung up.

John's second call had been to a directory enquiries service, from which he got Tom's company phone number and address. When he called Tom's office, a fast-speaking woman explained that Tom was busy in a meeting.

"Can I take a message for him?" she asked. "I'm sure he won't be long."

"It can wait," John replied. "But thank you."

Now John is on his way.

Once he reaches his destination, he will take the underground train to the city. The bus ride is long but necessary; police and security firms will be more alert on the underground. Three-quarters of an hour on the bus, half an hour on the train, and he will be at Tom's office. Then remains the question of how he will get close to Tom.

He will have to improvise.

Making sure his bag is out of sight, he unfolds the papers he found in the shoebox: Stapled web page printouts with data and pictures that describe the contents of the box. The information is new to him, and he has little time to prepare, so he reads carefully while the bus takes him closer to his target.

Semi-automatic. Eight rounds. Most effective within fifty metres. Safety switch location, recoil statistics, weight, dimensions.

John reaches into the box and fits his hand around the pistol's grip. The metal is cool and coarse. Two spare clips lie next to the weapon.

The bus stops. He puts the papers back, closes his bag, and leaves the bus. A short stroll across a park takes him to the underground train station. The ticket inspector is lost in a book half-hidden under a manual. No security in sight.

John rides down the escalator, stops on the platform, and looks along the tracks that lead to the city. The wind from the tunnel smells of soot and electricity.

He is closing in.

*

Lena

As soon as Agnes's car has skidded to a stop outside the block in which John had been seen, Lena leaves the vehicle and runs past the police officers.

A plastic crime scene tape forms a barrier between the entrance to the apartment block and the mass of curious people. Twelve officers and an ambulance have sparked interest, and tweets and texts have attracted hundreds of people. The police are surrounded by wool hats, mittens and concerned whispers. There are at least fifty cameras pointed at the flat.

Flashing her police ID card over her shoulder, she ducks under the crime scene tape, dashes into the block of flats, and stops outside Mick's door.

Inside the small flat are over a dozen police officers and paramedics shuffling around the confined space and mumbling to each other. The air stinks of chemicals. The doors of the ambulance outside were open, so she expects to find the apprehended man inside the flat, but there is no one in the room except police officers and medical personnel. Most paramedics and most of the officers are struggling with the built-in wardrobe door, but their backs block her view.

Despite the cold, sweat breaks out on Lena's back. Something bad has happened here. She can tell from the atmosphere alone, and a closer inspection of the room confirms her fears.

A pool of blood has formed on the floor near a broken table. Motes of dust swirl in the light from an overturned lamp. She opens her mouth to tell everyone to leave before they ruin every useful trace, then glimpses the wardrobe.

Choking on her shout, she makes a strangled sound and begins to turn away, but she forces herself to look. A deep-seated remnant of her professional self knows this is a critical moment. She has to make sure she understands what she sees. After a few seconds, she walks away, fists clenched and her breath caught in her lungs.

Leaning against a wall, she waits for a paramedic to give her a rundown of what has happened to the two men inside the flat. She is fairly sure she

knows, but she needs details to digest, facts she can break down to manageable pieces and isolated observations.

Hopefully, she will not have to go back inside the flat; the space might pull her into the pool of insanity that must fill John's head. The idea of saving him is shrivelling into a laughable dream. This is the second crime scene in two days with which she cannot cope, but she has to stay in case she spots a trace, a sign, anything to point her in the right direction.

The items Agnes and the officers find in the flat infuriate Lena as much as her inability to revisit the scene. They probably have Molly's murderer; the flat is covered in prints, and copies have been hurried to the headquarters for matching. The police have secured a major drug stash, too. On top of that, they have secured a large sum of money, numerous other fingerprints, and a tennis racket case with a disassembled automatic pistol.

A good find on any day except this, because what they need to find is a clue that tells them where John is. There is no landline or mobile phones in the flat. The men must have hid their phones, unless they are buried in the mess on the floor.

Lena chews on her lip and glances at Agnes. The younger officer looks at ease as she helps the paramedics push a rolling stretcher through the block's narrow doorway. When they arrived, Agnes took a long look inside the flat, glanced at Lena, and jogged off to the underground station to buy Lena a cup of what the local kiosk called coffee.

The woman is hardening by the hour; there is no trace of anxiety on the woman's face, but she had been shook by the scene in Molly's flat. Agnes's tenseness has been replaced by an irritating cool; as a senior officer, Lena is supposed to be a role model, not a nervous wreck. That is not happening.

And if they do not find John soon, Lena is afraid she might collapse altogether. She steadies her hand, sips from her coffee, and looks up at the sky. The snowflakes sting her eyes.

"Lena Franke?" a male voice addresses her.

Lena looks down and finds in front of her a young man in a green paramedic uniform. His face is round and soft, making his unyielding and watchful expression look out of place.

"Yes?" Lena says.

"I was told you wanted a summary before we leave. It'll have to be quick. The other officers want us to move the man on the door out; the

sound is getting to them."

"The sound?"

"He's screaming, but you have to be close to hear him. Or maybe he's trying to speak. Don't get your hopes up; he won't be talking for a while. Perhaps he never will."

"I get it." Lena throws her empty coffee cup on the ground. "Give me the facts."

The man looks with disapproval at the cup and back at Lena. "We have two men, both in their late twenties. I saw the stuff in the flat, the drugs and all that, so I suppose you'll have their names soon. They'll have records."

"Maybe," Lena says, unwilling to speculate about details that do not matter now. "Tell me what happened."

The corner of the man's mouth twitches. "I can't tell exactly what went down in there, only the injuries. The man who's on his way to hospital has suffered severe trauma to his face. A hammer, I'd guess. His nose shattered, probable fractures to the surrounding bone. He's also got a trauma to the side of his head from some other tool, something sharp and heavy. We saw a bloodied toaster close to the broken table where he lay."

Lena swallows and bites her lip. John the placid painter almost braining a man with a toaster. The scenario is almost impossible to imagine. "How badly hurt is he?"

"He's lost lots of blood, and I wouldn't be surprised if he's suffered internal haemorrhages or damages to his brain, but–"

Lena presses the tips of her fingers to her forehead as a headache flashes into being. She squeezes her eyes shut, opens them again, and exhales through gritted teeth. "Right," she says. "Go on."

"Of course." The man's face is neutral while he waits for Lena to gather herself. "The other man," he says, "has been glued to the built-in wardrobe."

Lena nods; she thought she recognized the chemical smell, and the naked man on the wardrobe door had been covered by a semitransparent film. Where it covered his face, it had fixed the man's contorted face into a hideous mask of acute pain.

"His legs are straight down," the paramedic continues, "his arms along his sides. Apart from his jeans, he's naked. He's still stuck there because the wardrobe is wooden. If he'd been glued to the wall, the paint would've

come off and he would've fallen down. Wood just soaks it up. We have to saw him down."

"Bloody hell," Lena whispers.

"An officer found the glue can. It's some kind of spray-on instant super glue, industrial-strength stuff. It's been emptied over him, mostly over his face. He's breathing through his nose, so I think whoever did this covered the man's nostrils. But the guy's mouth, lips and teeth are practically fused together. The same with his eyes, his ears, and the rest of his face. The spray has dissolved much of his skin. Are you feeling all right?"

Lena leans against the wall while she stares at the ground. Her pulse booms in her head. Just as she thinks she understands how driven John is, he goes and does this. She wonders if there will be any trace of reason left in him when she finds him.

Even worse is the chance that John will not move again. What he has done here is different from the other incidents: he has taken his time to inflict a gruelling torture from which the victim, if he survives, never will recover.

And Lena is sure who the victim is. Even though he is encased in a shell of cement-hard glue, she knows him from the underground train surveillance footage. The prints will match. Gren will be relieved. One mission accomplished. Finding John will be the next priority, but a less urgent one. A stray lunatic is less dangerous than a killer on the loose, especially if he believes he has had his revenge.

But if John is done with his self-imposed mission, where is he?

Lena looks at the flat's opaque window. If Gren asks her to stand down, he will make a mistake. The murderer is alive. Deliberately kept breathing. Crippled, but not slain. John should not have held back; he wanted justice, and the woman he loved is gone. Her nemesis would need to meet the same fate.

Turning east, towards the city, she feels the conviction sink in. John is not finished; for all its horror, this scene lacks finality. The closure is yet to come.

"I'm okay," Lena says and straightens. She had tuned out the paramedic entirely. "What else?"

"Not much." The paramedic shrugs; he wants to get back to his work. "The glue is toxic, so as soon as we've got the man down, we need to take

him in for a blood transfusion. If he survives that long."

"Should either of the men talk," Lena says, "call us straight away. They have important information."

The man studies Lena for a few seconds. "They've been abused to near death, and you expect to interview them?"

"Just let me know if it happens." Lena's phone buzzes in her pocket. She turns away from the paramedic and picks up her phone. Gren. She takes the call.

"I was just about to call," she lies. "Tell me you have good news."

"No sign of John on the trains," Gren answers. "The managers aren't happy, but we can hold the trains for a little longer. What's the status at the flat? All I have from the local police station is bits and pieces."

"The forensic team is going over the flat. I think you'll be glad to know that the primary suspect is here."

"Under arrest?" Gren asks quickly.

"What's left of him is under arrest. You'll need to send a patrol to keep watch at the hospital."

"Please explain."

Lena retells what the paramedic told her. As she expects, Gren is stunned; he replies only with taut questions and delayed hums. She suspects that this is beyond anything he has encountered too. They are in uncharted territory, and it is up to her to find the lighthouse.

"I'm going to see if there's any lead as to where John's gone," Lena finishes. "I'll be in touch soon."

When she has hung up, she looks around to see if she can catch John spying on them, but she doubts he is anywhere near. The crowd has grown to at least three hundred people. As far as she is concerned, mobile social networking is a curse.

Once again she turns east. "Do something," she says under her breath. "Make some noise. But don't hurt anyone. No more pain. Not before I find you."

She stands in the wake of John's deeds, surrounded by questions and riddles. This hunt will go on forever unless she changes the rules. In order to intercept John, she must tease out the *why* from the rampant confusion that is John's mind. She has to make sense of the disturbed logic that drives him.

Walking towards the block's front door, she steels herself in preparation for going inside. There is no staying away any longer. Somewhere in the flat, there might be a critical lead, a subtle hint to John's next move.

Just as she is about to enter, the door opens and Molly's murderer is rolled out on a stretcher by two grim-looking paramedics.

A murmur rises from the crowd. The man on the stretcher racks so hard he threatens to throw off the blanket strapped over his body, so a third paramedic walking beside the stretcher does her best to keep the man covered from the cameras.

Lena is unsure why the man is shaking; perhaps because of toxins in the glue, or maybe from pain. The blanket is wrapped closely around the man, and as he passes in front of her, she sees a rectangular outline in one of his pockets. A phone.

She waits while the man is loaded into the ambulance to the sound of spectators gasping in wonder and revulsion. Once the man is inside, she quickly walks up to the vehicle and grabs one of the doors before a paramedic enters.

"Just a second," Lena says and climbs into the ambulance.

The confined space is packed with shelves, drawers, tubes, lights and switches. In the middle, the man strapped to the stretcher twitches and jerks like a doll pulled in all directions by invisible strings.

She glimpses an arm and a leg, stiff and coloured bright red by the stiff layer of super-strength glue. Even if the doctors can get it off his skin and save his life, the man will be a grotesque remnant of a human being.

A frantic humming sounds from the man's face under the blanket. Perhaps he knows Lena is near and wants to talk. Or perhaps he can sense her secret, hidden under her brittle front as an upholder of law and order. Maybe he feels what she is capable of and wants her to end his pain. One monster communicating with another on some silent, subconscious level.

But the actions of this man have caught up with him. His punishment had been realized by John, peaceful painter turned avenging angel. No one had come for Lena yet. Until that happened, she would snatch her kin back from the brink. And she would start with John.

She turns her back to the protesting paramedic and pulls out her pocketknife, carves through the man's jeans, and pulls out the mobile phone. The touchscreen is black. A trickle of blood seeps through the jeans;

the knife is small, but she keeps it sharp. Grimacing, she pockets the phone inside her jacket and turns around to face the scowling paramedic.

“Are you finished in there?” he asks. “There’s no time for this. We have to take him in, right now.”

Lena hops down from the ambulance and moves out of the flustered man’s way. “All done,” she says. “Let me know if he talks.”

The paramedic looks at Lena, pulls the doors shut in her face, and the ambulance drives away, its siren blaring.

Agnes walks up to Lena’s side. “What was that about?” she asks.

“I’ll tell you in the car,” Lena says.

*

Lena

Four minutes later, Lena and Agnes exit a roundabout and leave the suburb. Lena sits in the passenger seat and prods at the mobile phone. She hopes it will work without a code.

The sun is a faint disc struggling to rise over the rooftops. Inside the car, the air is hot and stifling; the heaters run on full effect. Agnes swerves from lane to lane between slower cars. Agnes drives with less caution than usual; Lena suspects that Agnes is shaken by John's macabre act.

Lena resists the urge to throw the phone to the floor. She has never been a fan of technology; everything with circuits is at odds with her lack of patience. After printers, phones are the worst.

She almost drops the phone in surprise when it obediently comes to life after she presses a small button. Thankfully, there is no code, and after a few minutes she finds the call log. She is reading through the list while Agnes breaks for a red light near Brommaplan.

Agnes glances at the phone. "Anything interesting?"

"Not yet." Lena frowns. "There's not a single text. He must wipe them regularly. There are plenty of calls, but no recent ones. Only numbers in the address book, no names. I bet most are to prepaid accounts anyway."

Not for the first time, Lena wishes Swedish legislation was as stringent as it was in many other countries, where you have to register to have a prepaid phone. She takes out her notepad and starts to copy the numbers.

"I'll have the office run the numbers through the system once we're back," Lena says. "I'll copy local officers in too. They might see a familiar number. You never know. I just have to get the numbers out of this phone at the office. I'll need your help."

"Can't the tech department do that for us?" Agnes asks.

"We don't have time to fill out the forms. Besides, someone might break the damn thing. This is important."

Agnes frowns. "Didn't you break your old phone–"

"That was an accident."

"Oh."

They pass another roundabout and turn onto a bridge. “Why are you doing that now?” Agnes asks.

“It’s all I have to go on until John crops up somewhere else. I’m sick of chasing him. If there’s anything in here that’ll let me work out what he’s up to, I will find it.”

Agnes is quiet, then says, “Don’t forget to check the phone’s memory.”

Lena looks at her. “What?”

“In case the numbers you got there are from only the SIM card.”

“I know that,” Lena lies and tries to figure out how to access the phone’s internal memory. By the time she is done, they are driving down into the vast, damp garage underneath the police headquarters.

Eight minutes later, Lena is at her desk and types the numbers into an email to a technician. The office is filled with the drone of ringing phones, conversations, quick footsteps, coughs, the dull whirr of computers and the scraping of chairs. Outside the window, the clouds are a deep bluish black, heavy with the promise of more snow.

When she has sent off the list, she phones the recipient and tells her to report back immediately once the numbers have been checked. She hangs up and checks her email, her phone, the police’s internal system, and her post box. No news about John.

She shrugs off her jacket over the back of her chair and walks to the canteen for a sandwich. Seeing the crawling queue, she returns to her desk. Somewhere in the chaos of her drawers, she is sure, a protein bar is hiding.

“Any luck with the phone?” Agnes says behind Lena.

Startled, Lena spins her chair around with her hands half raised in defence. Agnes takes a quick step back. In each of her hands is a steaming cup.

“Don’t do that,” Lena tells her. “You’ll give someone a heart attack.”

“I’m sorry.” Agnes looks apologetic and offers Lena one of the cups. “I thought you might want more coffee. You didn’t get much sleep last night.”

Lena wants to groan as she takes the cup. “I thought you went back to your place?” She finds a half-eaten protein bar in the drawer. Not the meal she wished for, but a little is better than nothing.

“What I meant to say,” Agnes says, “is you can’t have slept more than six hours or so. I’m about to see if the patrols have any news. Call if you

need me.” She clears her throat, smiles, and walks away to her meticulously organized desk.

Lena’s gaze lingers on Agnes for a moment, then turns back to her desk, and she shakes her head. The junior officer is babysitting her. It is the last thing she needs.

What she does need is a lead. She checks her inbox again. Nothing. Her phone is almost fully charged, but she plugs it in anyway. She begins on a report she must submit but finds she cannot string together a coherent sentence. Sweat prickles her back.

She calls Gren, hangs up on his voicemail, and moves the windows on her computer screen around. Anxiety constricts her lungs. She is still hungry; stress and concentration are burning off every calorie she eats. Against all odds, she finds another protein bar and tears away the wrapping.

A new email arrives: The numbers from the address book in the mobile phone have been checked. All names sent to her, along with text messages retrieved from the service providers.

Lena throws her half-eaten bar onto the clutter on her desk, opens the email, and skims through the list. Twenty-one calls made during the past two days, to and from fourteen different numbers. Six outgoing, the rest incoming. Five of them to landlines.

She browses the text messages: Threats, questions, orders, agreed meeting times, locations, and prices. Some messages are in crackpot innuendo; others are misspelt pleas for drugs, typed by desperate and quivering thumbs. A wealth of leads for the narcotics department, but nothing that points to John.

She pinches the bridge of her nose and reads on, looking for clues in the thicket of acronyms, abbreviations, and butchered grammar. After a few seconds, she stops, and rereads one of the messages.

Gotta come 2 ur place pigs after me.

Sent yesterday afternoon. The time closely matches that of the shooting. The reply makes her lean closer to the screen.

Dont Im gonna meet T soon wat the fuk have u done

Another sent message:

Got 2 hide Ill talk to t l8er stay home Im comin

The reply:

Dam u better not b followed.

She presses her index finger to the ‘t’ on the screen. Perhaps the letter is short for Niklas’s dealer. If it is, then ‘t’ could have been near the flat when John appeared there. The chance that the might-be dealer has seen John or anything else relevant to the case is small, but she will explore every clue no matter how weak.

She opens the list of calls made from Niklas’s phone and scrolls down. Near the bottom is a mobile phone number that Niklas called moments after he got the first text message in which ‘T’ is mentioned. Mick had been supposed to meet him or her.

Had Niklas called his dealer?

She looks up the number and is unsurprised to find that it is anonymous; however unless the owner uses a military-grade secrecy screen, that is a small issue: if the phone is switched on, the police can trace it. But first she has to change into a new shirt; sweat makes the one she is wearing cling to her back.

“Agnes?” Lena calls and looks over her shoulder.

Agnes’s head snaps up. “Yes?”

“I need you.” Lena points to her monitor.

Agnes walks over and peers at Lena’s screen, and Lena points at the ‘T’.

“The dealer?” Agnes asks after a moment.

“Probably. Tell the tech department to get a fix on that phone’s location.”

“I’ll get right on it.”

“And let’s hope it isn’t turned off,” Lena says. “I’ll be right back.” She takes a spare T-shirt from a drawer, rises from her chair, and leaves for the bathroom.

*

John

The sight of Molly reassembles the scattered jigsaw puzzle in John's mind in a flash. A torrent of memories assaults him: recollections of Molly, the two together, quiet words in confidence, the baring of bodies and thoughts. Her face is a sum of all his needs.

He knows immediately that she is the one he has lost. This is the woman who has circled his thoughts, the grail of his trek through endless madness. That smile, those eyes, this mercurial, breathtaking sense of closeness.

Sinking down to his knees, he looks up at Molly's radiant face. The soft glow from Miriam's lantern is gone, replaced by a faint, crystal white radiance that seems to come from the air itself.

"You found me," Molly says. "At last." She reaches out, gently touches her fingers to John's cheeks, and brings them to her own lips, tasting his tears.

"I was lost," John whispers. "I've looked so hard."

"For me?" Molly's smile grows wider. "Such passion. I've been here all the time, John. I knew you'd come. Do you still want to leave?"

John shakes his head. "Never."

"Who was your friend?" Molly asks.

"She's–" John looks around, but Miriam is gone. She has abandoned him again.

"Never mind," Molly says. "Come with me." She turns around and walks away, her curls bouncing along her back like a restless river.

John rises up and staggers after Molly. He shivers, cries and laughs. An end to the journey, a closure to his search. If he can stand close to her, he will not long for anything else. Molly looks over her shoulder and beckons John to follow her deeper into the woods, away from the path.

They enter a clearing in which a single large tree rises from the centre. All is quiet apart from the wind that circles John slowly, as if waiting for a moment. Molly walks up to the tree, turns around, and presses her back to the trunk. A look of concern falls on her face. “Don’t leave me now. Not again. We used to be close.”

John laughs; the idea of leaving her is ridiculous. He reaches out to wrap her in his arms, but she raises a hand to stop him.

“Not yet,” she says. “We’re together again. Does it not feel like a dream?”

“A beautiful dream,” John agrees. “But what happened? How did you disappear?”

She silences him with a finger over his lips. “Don’t prod too hard. Soon, we’ll be united. Inseparable. Do you wish for that?”

“More than anything else.”

Smiling, Molly puts her slim hand on a door handle set in the tree and pulls.

A rectangular door set in the tree swings open. Light spills out, much brighter than any John has seen since he woke up on the lake. When his eyes have adapted, he sees Molly’s flat. Giddiness threatens to leave him outside as the door starts to close, but he rallies, pushes the door open, and steps inside.

Everything is in place. Molly’s shoes stand next to her slippers in the small hallway, right under the large mirror. The clock on the wall tells John it’s late afternoon, though the second hand does not move. The kitchen window opens to a panorama of a snowstorm so dense he cannot see the house across the street.

There is a glassy sheen to the kitchen wall. Wondering if moisture is seeping through the wallpaper, he runs his finger against the fabric and looks closer. It is not water, but a thin layer of ice.

“John?” Molly calls from the bedroom.

Pulled by the gravity of her voice, John turns around. “I’m coming,” he says but pauses in the doorway and frowns. “There’s something wet on the floor.”

Looking down, he finds himself standing barefoot in a pool of red. The sight makes him uncomfortable; it does not belong here. He winces, steps away, and enters the bedroom.

Molly’s sits among the sheets with a blanket wrapped around her. Patches of slick ice cover the walls, the psychedelic posters, the Post-it notes and the postcards nailed to the small notice board. The first painting he gave her hangs centred over the bed, perfectly horizontal in an apartment where order and straight angles used to be as rare as complaints and worries. The plastic alarm clock on the bedside table is cracked almost in half.

He longs to shed his dirty clothes and ground himself in her existence. “I’m so tired,” he says. “And so cold.”

Molly shifts under the blankets and opens them a fraction. “Come here and warm me.”

John takes off his trousers, throws away his shirt, and strips to his underwear. The piercing chill is a taut shell around his skin. Before he grows too cold to move, he puts one foot in the bed and remembers the red pool in the hallway.

“My feet are dirty,” he says.

She glances down and shrugs. “It doesn’t matter. That’s the past.”

“But I’ll ruin your sheets.” John notices more red blotches staining the floor in the bedroom. “Is that blood?” he asks, his teeth chattering.

“It’s history, my love. Can you change the past?”

“Of course not,” John answers.

“Then there’s no reason to fret. Now come.”

Trying not to look at the footprints he leaves on the cotton, John climbs into the bed. Molly wraps the blankets over John’s shoulder. Her hand is impossibly cold, but he longs to link his fingers with hers, the way they always did after they made love.

He tries to relax and savour the moment, but he cannot banish the image of the grimy blotches on the spotless sheets. They disgust him.

“I have to clean my feet,” John mutters.

“Hush.”

“But–”

“Sing with me.”

Bewildered, John falters. The cold seeps through his skin. “I can’t sing,” he stammers. “You know I can’t.”

“Everyone can. Everyone does. We’ll sing a song for us. You and I. Can you do that? For me?”

“I think so.” The cold is slowing his thoughts to a trickle. He remembers the desperate need that drove him before he found Molly again. There is something he should remember. Warning of lies and deception. The notion of a door.

John looks up to the painting above the bed. The image has changed; it still portrays Molly, but she is pressing her hands flat against an invisible surface, as if trapped behind a pane of glass. Her face is alive, every contour and curve animated. She gestures anxiously, points to the door, and mouths inaudible words.

She wants him to leave, head back to the nocturnal world from which he has found respite. When he shakes his head, the Molly in the painting presses her hands together, as if praying for him to run.

John turns away. He has already run. He found a door and a way out. He found Molly. There is nothing else he wants.

“Ignore that,” the Molly in his arms whispers. “It’s time to let go and be mine.”

She moves closer and closes her mouth over John’s.

Winter fills John’s body. His heart slows down. Molly grips his arms and pulls him closer while ice crawls over John’s skin, encasing him, shielding him from past horrors and future pain. Memories stream back from the void, evoked by seeing Molly’s face in the painting above the bed: He remembers the shot, running up the stairs, seeing the bedroom. All he treasured gone so quickly, so easily, taken by a twitch and a minuscule piece of metal.

As if sensing John’s sudden remembrance, Molly’s kiss grows more passionate. Mercifully, the hurt fades, and John relaxes. This is his reward. This is his closure. This is what Molly would have wanted.

No.

Uncertainty rises from the depth of his dwindling mind. John tries to smother the doubt, but it flares back to life.

No.

She wouldn’t.

“Wait–” John tries to speak, but Molly holds his mouth to hers.

“Don’t,” she growls. “Kiss me.”

Repelled by the unexpected doubt, John pushes Molly away. This is wrong. The painting brought back the true picture of Molly, and it jars violently with the woman who clings to him in this bedroom.

His Molly had loved life, heat, vigour, loud laughter and wild colours. This descent into a frozen stasis would be the real Molly’s utmost horror; she had hated every form of rigidity. The woman in his arms is an icicle; his real love had been a bonfire in a purple dress.

Drawing strength from his conviction, John arches his neck, and the coating of ice over his face cracks.

“Get away from me,” John says.

Still trying to force John’s mouth to hers, Molly screeches. She still looks like the real Molly, but John glimpses an emptiness underneath her appearance, as if she were a chasm disguised by a lacquer of looks and mannerisms. He does not know what this creature means, wants, or comes from, but he needs to break away before the cold overwhelms him.

“You’re mine,” the woman growls in his ear. “Always mine.” Her voice is feral and strained. “I’ve waited too long to let you go.”

John manages to push her away, centimetre by centimetre, until her teeth fill his vision. “Liar,” he wheezes. “You damned – fucking – *fraud*.”

Piece by piece, the ice cracks and falls off John’s skin. The cold is still fierce, but the deceit has made him furious. He has been screwed over at the very edge of his life.

With a final shove, John tumbles backward out of the bed and onto the floor, falling onto his back in the pooled blood. The woman lunges for John’s face, her fingers stiff and outstretched like talons, but he dodges and crawls back.

Slowly, he rises to one knee. He is still weak, but regains his strength every moment. The blood no longer disturbs him; at last, he accepts that Molly is gone. He will choose fight instead of flight. His Molly would have wanted that.

A tremor runs through the room. The weak lights blink, fail and return. Books and posters fall to the floor.

“You’ll never get away,” the woman hisses. “No matter how you try, I’ll be waiting.” She rakes after him again, quick as a snake.

John pulls back but is too slow; she follows and closes her hands around his throat. Gasping, John pulls at her wrists, but she latches on and forces him down on his back on the bed.

“If you won’t come in spirit,” she hisses, “you’ll come in flesh.”

Ink fills John’s vision. His will to fight ebbs away. He tries to strike her, but manages only a limp slap.

“This isn’t the union I had in mind,” she says and smiles, “but I work with what I have. Now give in. Give up. Let go. Throw away–”

The woman’s smile melts into surprise. Her grip around John’s throat eases. She tries to speak but only a grunt leaves her lips, followed by a string of saliva. John pulls back as the woman trembles and crashes to the floor.

Behind her is Miriam, gazing at John with wide eyes. In her right hand is a large paintbrush. The length of the shaft is soaked in blood. A new tremble shakes the furniture and makes the lights blink again.

“Jesus Christ,” John croaks. He is too staggered by the struggle and Miriam’s reappearance to be embarrassed by his nakedness.

Leaning forward, he gazes at the body on the floor. The woman who had posed as Molly lies on her chest with her arms twisted under her. Between her shoulder blades is a deep, gaping hole.

“You killed her with a paintbrush,” John says. He looks at the brush. “My paintbrush,” he adds. “I remember that one. It’s great for fixing mistakes.”

“Your memories come in handy,” Miriam says. “But I’m afraid it is still alive. That was only a spectre. One of its many tentacles. The beast below lives on, and it’s madder than ever.”

She holds out a hand to John. He accepts it, stands up, and together they stumble out into the hall.

“How are your legs?” Miriam asks.

John looks down. “I can stand. If I concentrate.”

“Then focus,” Miriam says and grips his hand harder. “Because we’re going to run.”

*

Lena

Lena enters the ladies-only bathroom, closes the door behind her, and sighs. A brief breathing pause. Silence and cold water to sharpen her thoughts. When she feels a little more awake, she will head back to the office and wait for the techs to trace the mysterious phone. They have an hour; after that, she will take to the streets and walk while she awaits the call. The office is slowly suffocating her.

The bathroom is a tiled corridor with six stalls along the left wall and a row of porcelain sinks on the right. A long mirror above the sinks reflects the yellowish light from the fluorescent tubes high above. At the far end of the corridor, opposite the door, is a large frosted window that overlooks a landscape of rooftops. In a corner of the ceiling is a small air vent, humming softly. She is alone; the doors to all the stalls are open.

Grimacing at the smell of disinfectants, she walks past the stalls and locks herself inside the last one. The blue T-shirt she has brought smells of dust, but it is dry and clean. Sweat, dirt and spots of blood stain the one she wears.

She takes off her shirt and slips into the T-shirt, wishing thoughts were as easy to swap. If they were, she would change her loop of anguish for the measured clarity that people expect from her. Not for the first time, she considers suggesting to Gren that Agnes could take over her role, and normal recruitment protocols be damned. Gren wants Lena in proper rehabilitation anyway. He may welcome the chance for a smooth transition.

The door to the bathroom opens and closes, and someone occupies the stall next to her, making only enough noise for Lena to know someone is using it. So much for a moment of privacy.

She takes her shirt under her arm, leaves her stall, and turns to the mirror in an effort to put her hair up. Pulling her hair back so hard she winces, she winds the elastic band hard around the tangled mass and studies her face in the mirror. Pasty skin, dirt on her forehead, bags under her eyes so dark she could have been in a fight. No wonder people fussed.

She needs more sleep, but that has to wait until John is found, brought in, sedated, and locked up. He has thrown the lid to her box of secrets open, and the contents are seeping out, making themselves known in her actions and words, even her face. Unless she finds John, he will destroy them both.

Breathing out, she cranes her neck and walks towards the exit, her dirty shirt clenched in her fist.

You were right, a male voice whispers.

Lena stops, frowns, and turns around. The voice was so hushed she barely caught the words. The stall adjacent to the one she used is still occupied, but she is sure the voice belonged to a man. No men use the ladies bathroom here.

Walking down the bathroom, she checks the other stalls. All empty. She shakes her head and takes another step towards the exit.

There is a place for people like us, the voice whispers again. *A prison. A dead end. A home*. Childish but deep, the voice trembles as if on the verge of laughter.

She walks back, slowly, until she faces the closed stall. Behind the door is a man, in the women's bathroom, whispering nonsense, raving to himself or someone on a phone.

Staring at the door, she tries to picture the man inside, but the notion feels contrived and false. The space where the vision would fit is already taken by another, more alarming sensation. Sweat trickles down her back again. The hum from the air vent seems to grow louder.

Do you understand the world now? The voice sighs. *You have lived like a bug on its surface, never crawled inside it. Until today.*

Lena backs away from the closed stall until her back is against the sink. Her eyes are fixed on the door. The voice is familiar: it belongs to a face that hovers on the threshold of her awareness, refusing to come into focus.

"Can I help you?" Lena demands in a weak voice.

Oh, but the chance to help has come and gone. It's too late for me, too late for him, and much too late for you.

"I haven't got time for this shit. If you want to–"

Such a swift journey, the voice giggles. *A pull, a slip and a twitch, and here we are. We bought the ticket, you and I, and we took the ride. We went all the way down. I just went a little faster than you.*

Finally, Lena recognises the voice. She drops her shirt and grips the sink so hard one of her fingernails cracks in half. Her eyes are so wide they fill with tears.

The voice laughs. *Is that disbelief on your face? How pathetic. Did you think your badge would save you? That a lacquer of virtue could hold the real you in a cage?*

Inside the stall is the paedophile she shot in the botched raid.

The first and last time she heard that voice, it accused her for bursting into its private domain of abuse and misery. She shut it up with a bullet sent straight through the man's words.

Your moral high ground can't keep your feet dry, the voice continues. *There's no stopping the flood, and it has come to wash you away.*

"Never," Lena whispers.

We're together at last. Didn't you know? A burst of dry laughter. *Of course you don't. You've never looked.* The voice gains in strength and makes the closed door shudder. *You never. Fucking. Looked*.

Panic closes in on Lena. This is a wind-up, an illusion, a nightmare reinforced by fatigue and fear. She has fallen asleep in the stall or at her desk, accidentally letting the demons in to taunt her. Still, her senses tell her otherwise. The sink is icy cold against her skin, the pain from her broken fingernail hot and vivid. The voice is real.

"Shut up." Lena's voice is a coarse murmur.

You ought to thank me. I've showed you what you've forgotten, or tried to forget.

"Go away." Her mouth is parched, her lungs empty. She swallows and draws a haggard breath. "You're not real."

I pulled your curtains of pretty ideals apart.

A pause, followed by long, wheezing laughter.

How do you like the view?

At last, Lena snaps. Adrenaline fountains like wildfire in her limbs. She has to look inside the stall, and when she does, she will see a man whose face she will ruin for pulling off this psychotic prank.

There is no slit under the door; the only way to see who hides in the stall is to peek over its walls, which means standing on the toilet in one of the adjacent stalls. She cannot will herself to do that, so instead she takes a step back and kicks the door with all her strength.

The thin door cracks down the middle with a sharp *pang* that makes her ears ring. Splinters and chipped wood explode into the stall. One part of the door remains hanging askew on a hinge while the other half falls down onto the tiled floor.

The stall is empty.

Standing in the doorway with her fists balled, she blinks with watering eyes into the stall. Toilet, brush, toilet roll, coat hanger. No man. The voice is gone. The small vacant space is a void where something had been a second ago.

She stumbles back to the sink, slumps down onto the floor, and rests her head in her hands, still keeping an eye on the stall. There is nowhere to hide or escape, but she did hear the words, every drawled syllable. It was not a hallucination.

Wiping away her tears, she coughs and bites back a sob. She cannot crack now. Not before she has found John. If she is destined to lose her sanity, she will do so only when the chase is over. Perhaps her saneness is not an essence she can keep bottled up by will alone, but she will try.

Slowly, she rises from the floor, picks up her shirt, and looks at the destroyed stall. Her breathing is shallow and rapid.

She gives the stall the finger, and leaves the bathroom.

*

Lena

Agnes is waiting by Lena's desk. In her hand is a paper, but she lowers it as Lena approaches.

"Are you okay?" Agnes asks. "Someone just said they heard a crash from the ladies' room." She frowns at Lena's torn fingernail. "Is that blood?"

"The door was stuck. I broke it. Remind me to tell the janitor." Lena pulls a Band-Aid from a green plastic first-aid kit on the wall. "What is that in your hand?" she asks. "News?"

Agnes nods. "The phone is an anonymous prepaid account, but they got a good approximate location. It's on the system." She uses Lena's computer to open up the map.

A thumbnail-sized shadowed circle in the middle of the city marks the supposed location of the phone. The circle covers four blocks. There will be hundreds, if not thousands of people inside the area.

"We're lucky," Agnes continues. "The phone is in the city, so it was easy to triangulate."

"Great." Lena inspects her bandaged finger. "Have they got a call log for that phone?"

"It's on the system."

Lena sits down to open the file on her computer, but her hands shake so much she cannot type. Before she can say anything, Agnes leans over and uses Lena's mouse.

"Here." Agnes runs a finger down the list of incoming calls on the screen. "That's Niklas's number, third from the bottom."

Lena nods and puts her hands in her lap to stop them from trembling. She hopes Agnes has not noticed how unsettled she is. "Let's check all calls he made and received today and yesterday," she says. "Names, addresses for the landlines."

"I thought you would want to do that." Agnes moves the mouse and clicks. "Here. Eighteen calls, eleven to landlines."

Lena reads through the names and addresses of the landline phones that had called the anonymous mobile. This time, they were less lucky; the locations are across the entire city. She reads through the list again. “Fourth and eight addresses,” she says. “Tobias Fryklund, Farsta, and Tom Lundberg in Bromma. One south, one west.”

“You think one of them is him?”

“Their names start with T. It’s a far shot, but worth testing.” Lena enters one of the names in a criminal record search and shakes her head.

“Tobias was nabbed for bike theft at the age of fifteen, and that’s that. It was also last year. Let’s try Tom.”

Lena expects a similar, useless record, but when the result whisks onto the screen, she raises her eyebrows. “No recent activity,” she reads out loud, “but he’s got a string of old charges for minor possession of illegal substances, eight in total.” She scrolls down. “He has also been in court for one charge of assault and fraud, and he did time in a juvenile prison. There’s also a recent suspicion of tax evasion. No convictions, though.”

“What do you think?” Agnes asks.

“Look at that.” Lena points to another window. “He’s filthy rich, too. I think Tom’s our man.”

“Do you want to bring him in? I can call the prosecutor.”

“What I want,” Lena says quietly while she browses Tom’s details, “is to get everyone on the streets and scour the damn city for a trace of John. This is a good lead if we want to nail Tom for dealing, but we haven’t got time for that. We need to make sure every taxi driver has a picture of John. He’s running on empty now. John must be a wreck, and he must look like one too.”

“Understood,” Agnes says. “We can alert coaches and the national railway as well, in case John tries to leave Stockholm.”

“Good idea. I don’t want to take any chances with either of the two. We might as well talk to the airports too, and ask them to raise their alert.”

“Do you think Gren will authorize it?”

“He’ll agree after I’ve called them. Meanwhile, you can look up the call logs for Tom’s landline.”

Lena looks up the number to the national railways administration. Getting train staff and bus drivers involved means more people looking, and

John will surface somewhere. The more eyes that search for him, the quicker she will know.

Someone will spot him. Someone must. She refuses to be shoved back to square one. They are tracing a bomb that should have gone off long ago.

She busies herself with filling out the necessary forms and makes a mental note to contact the search patrols again. After that, she will ask the forensic team if they found anything useful in the flat on their second visit.

Just as she submits the form, Agnes materializes by her side.

“I got the call logs like you asked me to,” Agnes says.

“And?”

“I found something.”

“Yes?” Lena motions for Agnes to continue.

“It’s the call log from Tom’s landline. A call was made to Tom’s landline from a phone booth in Hässelby Gård, only minutes before someone at Tom’s home called the mobile phone we traced in the city.”

“Are you sure?” Lena asks. “What time was the call made?”

“About an hour after John was spotted in Hässelby.”

Lena looks at Agnes. Thoughts and suspicions fly through her head, and she struggles to separate wishes borne by hope from conclusion based on logic.

“Anyone who’s got the number to Tom’s landline,” Lena says, “can have Tom’s mobile phone number too.” Still, the timing disturbs her. Even if it had been one of Tom’s friends who called, the message could have been related to John.

To find out who called Tom’s landline, they have to ask the person who answered the call. Lena dials the landline number and waits while the phone rings on the other end.

“Marie,” a sleepy woman’s voice answers.

Lena moves to activate the phone’s loudspeaker but changes her mind. “This is detective Lena Franke from the Stockholm County Police Department,” she says. “We would like your help with a few brief questions. Thank you for taking your time.”

“I don’t–”

“You received a phone call at twenty to eleven this morning. We require the full name of the person who called you.” Lena does not know if the

woman on the other end took the call in question, but she hopes so. And if she does not cooperate, there are more suspicions she can test.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” The woman’s voice has gone from sleepy to tense in the space of a few seconds. “How do I even know you’re the police?”

Lena wonders if people often called the woman and pretended they were someone else. She opts for some mild coercion.

“If you have a number display,” Lena says mildly, “you will see that this call comes from the police department’s exchange. Feel free to look up the number at your own leisure. If you’re still in doubt, we’re more than happy to come visit you.”

“No, wait. I just–”

“There is a patrol car close to where you are, but we would rather do this over the phone to save time. It’s your call.” The effort of polished formality makes Lena cringe, but she needs to play this straight. The woman will not want police officers in her home, and the more formal Lena sounds, the more she tightens the vice. Given the things found in Mick’s flat, Tom’s home will be turned upside down at some point anyway.

When the woman on the other end speaks again, she sounds fraught. “I don’t have anything – shit, what has he done – look, can I call you back?”

“Absolutely, but there is no need. I’ll send the officers up instead. They won’t be a minute. Thank you for your–”

“No, wait. Hold on. What was it you wanted to know?”

“The full name of the person who called you at twenty to eleven this morning. And that person’s residential address, if you know it.”

“Let me think.” A short pause. “I remember now. There was a man who called and asked for Tom. I told him Tom was still at the office. They had a big party yesterday. Tom always stays there when he’s hung over,” the woman explains with a note of hysteria in her voice.

“What was this man’s name?” Lena asks.

“I don’t know,” the woman on the phone says. “Honestly, I have no idea. I’ve never seen the number before. He didn’t even know the name of Tom’s company. It’s Lundberg Invest, but the guy who rang called it something else, like he was guessing.”

Lena sits up straighter. “Are you suggesting that the man who called wasn’t one of Tom’s friends?”

“I thought he was. He never said so, though.”

“Did he say anything else?”

“He thanked me for helping him. Sounded kind of weird, now that you ask.”

“What did his voice sound like?”

“Not sure. Not young. Not old either. A bit stiff.”

Lena stares into the distance. The room grows glacially cold.

“Hello?” the woman on the phone bleats nervously. “Are you still there? Are we done?”

Lena does not reply. She recalls what she thought when she stood outside Mick’s flat: after what John had done there, he would want to get as far away as possible from the police, do anything to avoid getting caught, but also that he was not done.

A cold wave washes through her as she realises she was right. He was not done. John is still on the hunt.

“Did you give John the name of Tom’s company?” Lena asks the woman weakly, hoping the answer would be no.

“Who’s John?”

“Did you tell the man who rang you where Tom is?” Lena shouts.

“Jesus Christ, please calm down. Yes, I did. That’s hardly a crime, is it?”

Lena slams the phone down and turns to Agnes. “Get the call log from that phone booth.” Her throat hurts when she speaks.

While Agnes calls the telephone network, Lena turns to her computer and searches for Lundberg Invest. She finds the address: near Stureplan, right in the middle of Stockholm’s fashion and banking district. An expensive office address. The pieces come together. She looks up the address on a map, and as she dreads, the address is exactly in the spot where Tom’s mobile phone has been traced.

Agnes scribbles on a notepad, hangs up, and turns to Lena.

“Another call was made from the booth,” Agnes says. “Just after the call to Tom’s landline. It was to an office in the city.”

“This one?” Lena points to the screen where the address is highlighted on a map. Her heartbeats are a rising thunder in her head. The police office is quiet; everyone is watching her.

“That’s the one,” Agnes says. “Do you think it’s John?”

“I know it’s him.”

“How–”

“I just know.” She rises from the chair so fast it falls over. So many things she needs to do, all of them screaming for attention. “Agnes, call that office and tell them to lock all their doors and stay there. Nobody leaves until we get there. If they ask why, say there’s been a robbery next door.”

While Agnes calls, Lena points at a colleague and then at her own computer screen. “Get every damn available car to this address. The suspect might be present and violent.”

The officer nods and springs into action; the rumour of what Lena encountered at Mick’s flat has spread.

Lena snatches her jacket from the back of her chair and runs towards the door. As she runs, she touches her gun waiting in its holster like a patient promise.

Just as she exits the room, Agnes catches up with her, and the two women jog down the corridor side by side, towards the elevators.

“There was no answer at the office,” Agnes says. “Not even an answering machine.”

“Damn it,” Lena says under her breath and turns a corner. “It’s John. He’s there.”

“Do you want me to call Gren?” Agnes asks.

“I’ll do that,” Lena replies. “As soon as we’re in the car.”

Less than a minute later, Lena and Agnes shoot out of the garage and into the white afternoon.

Three other police cars follow them from the garage. Snow drizzles down from the grey sky and reduces their sight to only a block ahead.

Agnes turns right, skids up on the pavement, swerves back on the road, and continues around an empty park on a hill. Lena turns the siren on and gets her safety belt on. A moment later, one of their side view mirrors smacks into a parked truck and cracks. Until today, Agnes has always driven as she has acted: cool, gentle and controlled. This rough, reckless driving is new, and possibly lethal.

“Sorry.” Agnes’s hands grip the steering wheel hard. “I’m nervous.”

Lena’s phone rings while they turn another corner and continue downtown.

“Franke,” she answers while the city rushes past the window. Unless they slow down, they might not survive the short trip.

“This is Gren. Where are you?”

“I was just about to call,” Lena says. “We’re on our way to an office near Stureplan, and–”

“I know,” Gren says. “I came in to the headquarters just after you left. Why do you think John is heading to this office?”

“It’s complicated.” Lena holds on to her seat while Agnes turns a corner and guns the car down a sloping street. “But it’s not a wild guess. I promise.”

“The Piket group are on their way too. They’ll probably be there before you.”

Lena makes a disgusted sound. Bringing in the police’s heavily armed response team makes sense, but the presence of more officers could cause John to run or send him deeper into his escalating madness.

Gren pauses before he continues. “Lena, listen to me.”

“I have to–”

“Shut up and listen.”

Pure surprise makes Lena go quiet. Never before has she heard her commander on the verge of losing his temper. He was choosing the worst of moments to scold her. She wanted to tell him to go to hell, but he might order her back to the office.

“I’m listening,” Lena says.

“I had a call from a paramedics manager about your visit inside an ambulance. He said you tried to interrogate a man who was on the brink of death. And someone here just mentioned your name in connection with a destroyed booth in the bathroom.”

“The door was jammed.”

“I appreciate that you’re doing all you can to find John,” Gren says, “but I can only do so much before you’ll be taken off this case, or worse. More important people than me are watching. Do I make myself clear?”

“Crystal.”

“When this is over, you and I will have a talk, and you will go on a brief leave. As I said, the Piket group might already be there, but do not proceed without them. Don’t enter, don’t call, don’t do anything. That’s an order.”

“Anything else?”

He pauses again. “Be safe,” Gren says, and hangs up.

Agnes glances at Lena. “What did he say?”

“Nothing helpful. Drive faster.”

They shoot under first one overpass, then another, and accelerate down a broad street lined with theatres, bars and cinemas. In the distance, at the end of the street, is a mushroom-shaped sculpture, high as two men and ringed by pay phones. The other police cars are just behind Lena and Agnes. Cars in front veer left and right as they try to move out of the way. The sirens roar between the walls.

Agnes’s eyes are concentrated on the street ahead. “Almost there,” she says.

*

John

John stands in front of Tom’s office.

The building is a wide six-storey block with spacious, century-old apartments converted to a maze of offices and conference rooms. Tall windows in the ochre façade reflect the grey-white sky. Most windows are dark, though a few are brightly lit by halogen spotlights inside.

John leans against the wall across the street and speaks into his mobile phone. His bag is slung over his shoulder, the remaining glue spray can is held tight in his right armpit, and the gun is tucked down the back of his trousers. He keeps his injured hand in his pocket; it can attract attention, and the hand is too swollen to hide inside a glove. If left untreated, he suspects the cuts will make the hand useless, but he will not need it much longer.

His hands, his feet, and his heart protest against what he has put them through over the past day; however they have served their purpose. His organs have taken him and his tools here. This is where his mission will end. What he did to Niklas is not enough, but ending Tom will settle the debt.

He does not long for violence; his only goal is to restore the balance. The needle on the scales burns red in his mind. Justice for a crime committed. Pain for hurt inflicted. A life for a life lost.

Unless, of course, Tom’s death reveals yet another part of the chain. If that were to happen, John will go on, link by link.

A group of women and men in suits and designer jackets leaves the building through its glass-and-steel entrance. They pause to zip up jackets and tighten wool scarves, then head towards the nearby plaza, walking slowly in the narrow path made by other pedestrians. Few cars pass outside; the street is wide but ends in a cul-de-sac currently used as a snow dump, making the street passable only by foot.

The entrance opens to a large marble hall. Inside is a spiral staircase to the left of the doors. Next to the staircase is a large, lush plant in a terracotta pot, placed to conceal a fire extinguisher. On the opposite wall are a chrome

bin and two elevators. To the right of the elevators is a curved desk in pale pine. Behind the desk, a receptionist watches a flat computer screen. She is a complication. He had not expected the entrance to be manned on a weekend.

John crosses the street and waits near the entrance. He continues to pretend to have a conversation over the phone. A sign next to the door lists the companies on each floor. Lundberg Invest is on the second floor.

After a few minutes, the doors to the elevator open. A man exits, walks towards the entrance, and opens the door. As the door swings back, John steps forward and keeps it open. When the man glances at John, he nods in greeting at the man and murmurs spurious details of an advertisement plan into his phone. The man frowns and walks away. John steps into the hall, closes the door behind him, and walks towards the stairs.

“Excuse me,” the receptionist chirps.

John pauses with one foot on the stairs. He turns to face the receptionist.

“Can I help you?” she asks.

John walks up to her desk and studies her. Flawless make-up, early twenties, not a strand of hair straying from her blonde ponytail. Blue business shirt, sleek black headset.

“I’ve come to see Tom Lundberg,” John says. His voice echoes in the marble hall.

“Of course.” She flashes a professional smile, taps at her screen, and frowns. “Have you made an appointment?”

“I’m afraid I haven’t.” John grimaces. “It’s regarding a proposition I think Tom will be interested in. The deal is quite big, if you see what I mean. Which is why I’m here in person.”

The receptionist nods but looks apologetic. “I understand, and I’m sure he would be interested, but unfortunately Tom is not in. Can I take a message?”

John pauses. “I don’t understand,” he says. “I called in earlier to make sure that Tom would be here. The woman who took the call confirmed that he was.”

“Oh yes, I remember,” she says. “You spoke with me. Tom was in at the time, but he’s gone to Arlanda Airport for a business trip. He’s due back early next week.”

John stiffens and holds his breath. His prey has fled, perhaps too far to be caught before the police come too close. His head begins to throb. The muscles in his body ache with pent-up tension.

“I thought you wanted to talk to him over the phone,” the receptionist continues. “But you hung up or were disconnected. If I’d known you wished to see him, I would have told you he would be leaving. I’m terribly sorry. Do you have his mobile phone number?”

“I do,” John says, “but this is a matter I’d like to discuss face to face with Tom. Perhaps I can go to the airport and meet Tom there, if there’s time?”

“I suppose you can,” the receptionist says hesitantly. “His flight will leave early this afternoon, so he might already have gone through passport control. Let me give him a call and see where he is. Perhaps he can wait for you outside the security check.” She beams at John and reaches for her keyboard.

John weighs risks in his mind. He asks if she knows exactly when Tom’s plane is meant to take off.

“I have the details of the booking here, but–” The receptionist trails off and looks up.

John sees the wariness in her face, but she is too late. Three quick strides take him around her desk, where he crouches, close to the receptionist and out of sight from the entrance.

The receptionist stands up. “Excuse me, but this is a restricted space. You must move away.”

When John fumbles inside his jacket instead of leaving, she takes a step back and reaches for the phone on her desk.

“If you don’t leave, I’ll have to–” she begins.

John aims his gun at her. “Keep still,” he says. He must use both his hands to hold the weapon; its weight pulls his injured, tired fingers down.

The receptionist stares at the gun while her professional airs dissolve into naked fear. She points at a handbag that hangs on the back of her chair. “Take it,” she stammers. “It’s all I have.”

“Sit down and face the entrance.” When a faint ringtone sounds from the woman’s headset, he instructs her to ignore the call and take off the headset. He grabs a handful of power cords on the floor and pulls the plugs out of

the sockets. The computer and the telephone shut down with a series of clicks. Glancing above the desk, he looks at the front door. No one outside.

“Get down on the floor,” John says.

The receptionist obeys, moving as if only in partial control of her limbs. Her face is pallid and clammy.

This is a new problem; if the woman faints, he will have to find someone else who has the information he needs. Pain or fear might keep her conscious long enough.

John takes out his knife from his bag and explains what he will do with the knife if she passes out. He adds that he does not want to hurt her, but he must.

Tears well up in the woman’s eyes. “What do you want?” she croaks.

“Information,” John says. “Not money. Did you book Tom’s ticket?”

“Yes.”

“Do you have a copy?”

“Yes.” She chokes back her tears and nods at the desk above her.

“Get the paper and show it to me.”

“It’s not a paper,” she says and swallows. “The ticket’s on the computer.”

There is a small printer on the desk. “Print a copy of the ticket,” John says.

“You turned it off.” The receptionist points a trembling finger at the sockets. “You have to plug the cables back in.”

John plugs the computer in again. “Hurry up.”

The receptionist rises slowly, sits down on the chair, and starts up the computer. Minutes pass while she sobs and stares at the screen. Someone exits the elevator and leaves through the front door.

“Here,” she says hoarsely. “Tom’s itinerary and the other papers.”

John looks at the columns and rows of information on the screen. “Print it.”

The printer buzzes and spits out a stack of papers. Keeping his gun trained on the receptionist, John takes the papers and studies them. The flight leaves at three thirty.

One of the printouts shows a copy of Tom’s passport: A man in his early thirties, fit and broad, white perfect teeth. Slightly raised chin, two-day

stubble. Hard eyes focussed on the lens. Thick dark hair, perfect brush cut. Success with a dry smile.

John memorises gate, departure time, and flight number. He checks the time. The flight leaves in two hours. Quickly, he looks around the desk. Still no one outside.

He stands up and slams the butt of his gun into the monitor until it cracks and goes black.

“Walk up the stairs,” John says and takes his bag. “Keep in front of me, and take me to another way out. An emergency exit, if there is one.”

The receptionist begins to cry again. “There is. If I show you, can I go?”

“Yes,” John says to calm her, but he knows that he will have to bring her along; the woman is too harried. No threat will stop her from breaking down and telling the police everything.

The receptionist nods, rises and walks slowly towards the stairs. After three steps, John tells her to stop.

Motionless, he stares at the entrance, oblivious to the risk of being seen. A sound on the border of his awareness has caught his attention. A remote, blaring song. Two distant notes of imprisonment and ruin.

Sirens.

They are coming closer; he can see flashes of blue in the windows across the street. He turns to the receptionist, who stands unmoving on the stairs, and she understands the look on John’s face.

“No,” she says, hysteria rising in her voice. “It wasn’t me. I swear. You watched me all the time. I didn’t call. You have to believe me.”

John turns away. Even if the receptionist had managed to trip an alarm, it is irrelevant now. The police are coming, and he must escape. Only that matters. Fear is a concept left behind in Molly’s flat.

“Lie down behind the desk,” John says.

The receptionist turns around, stumbles to the floor, and crawls to her chair. Once she is out of sight behind the desk, John walks over to the entrance door, pulls it open, soaks the lock with the spray glue, and pushes the door shut. The sirens, now more than one, howl in the distance.

John leans close to the glass pane and looks down the street. A police car is speeding down the road. Behind it are a large van and more police cars. There are seconds left before they are outside the entrance, metres from John. If he runs now, they will be too close behind him.

“Stay there,” he tells the receptionist.

John crosses the floor and fetches the fire extinguisher. As the police car skids to a stop outside and its blue lights flick across the marble walls, he rips off the safety seal, turns the muzzle towards the entrance, and squeezes the handle.

The fire extinguisher spews a torrential cascade of dry powder that instantly transforms the hall into a wintry landscape, filling the air and blocking all sight through the windows. The sirens screech as if raging at losing sight of him. John coughs, holds his breath, and continues to spray. When the hall is thoroughly clouded, he drops the fire extinguisher, returns behind the desk, and draws the gun again.

Someone bangs on the entrance and rattles the handle. “Police,” a male voice barks over the sirens. “Open the door.” More bangs follow. John hears the glass crack. A few more hits and it will break.

“Where is the fire alarm?” John asks the receptionist.

She points to a small red box near the staircase. John looks between the alarm button, the stairs, and the front door. The entrance is a faint rectangle of light behind the churning white powder.

“Go back to the stairs,” John says.

“Why?” the receptionist stammers. “Where are we going?”

John does not answer. He stands up, turns to the entrance, and raises his gun.

The receptionist raises her hand to her mouth. “No, don’t–”

The shots are thunderous whiplashes, much louder than John had anticipated, and the violent recoil almost wrenches the weapon out of his hands. He grips it firmly, squares his feet, and keeps firing.

Two of the bullets miss the window and bury themselves in the mortar behind the marble. The remaining six bullets tear through the white cloud and through the window. Next to the staircase, the receptionist screams and covers her face.

After all eight shots, the gun clicks. Screams and shouts sound over the sirens outside. A car alarm bleats manically near the entrance. John breaks the glass cover of the fire alarm with the butt of the gun and punches the button.

A piercing ringing joins the pandemonium. Outside, a voice shouts inaudible words in a megaphone. The receptionist looks at John through her

fingers. Her eyes flicker to the gun. She does not know the magazine is empty.

“Show me the emergency exit,” John shouts. “One far from this room. If you choose to stall, I will shoot you in your spine. You will die or be crippled for life. Understood?”

She shakes her head. “There are people up there. I can’t help if someone sees–”

“That doesn’t matter. If they stop us, I’ll shoot them.”

“Okay.” Her breathing is rapid. “Oh, God. Okay.”

She rises and walks up the stairs unsteadily. On the first floor, the receptionist opens a door and leads John into an office. John closes the door behind them and looks around.

A long corridor, five doors on either side. Wooden floor, white walls, framed art posters. At the far end of the corridor is another door; above it, an emergency exit sign.

Keeping the receptionist in front of him, John walks down the corridor and peers inside the rooms he passes. Broad desks, computer monitors, unplugged cables and coffee cups. The air smells of beer and Xerox machines. All lights are off. No people in sight. Outside, sirens howl, car doors slam, and people shout, all against the backdrop of the manic car alarm.

When they reach the door at the end of the corridor, John tells the receptionist to stop.

“Is this the way out?” he asks.

She nods and swallows. “The stairs behind the door lead to an exit to the plaza on the other side of the building.”

“Step aside.” John looks through the window in the door. Inside is a spiral staircase in matte metal. Below the stairs, he glimpses another windowed door, and beyond that, the streets outside. He sees no police officers.

He closes the door, looks around the corridor, and finds what he is looking for. Lowering his bag to the floor, he turns back to the receptionist.

“Close your eyes,” John says.

*

Lena

Frenetic shouts surround Lena while she peers through the car's shattered side window.

"Drop your weapon and come out–"

"Too much blood. Get a bandage–"

"Watch his finger. It's going to–"

"I got it. Hold still–"

"Keep your head down–"

Her head rings from screams, car alarms, sirens, clanging alarm bells, radio calls and the metallic rustle of weapons. Breathing is difficult; her lungs feel as stiff as concrete.

"Fucking hell," a Piket team officer next to her growls. "He's armed."

"Really?" Lena lets out a shuddering breath. She grimaces and wipes fragments of the car's window from her clothes. Slivers of glass protrude up from the snow around her.

She turns away from the side window and slides down, her back pressed against the car door. Her hands are sweaty around the black metal of her gun. Tasting iron in her mouth, she spits blood on the ground. She must have bit her tongue when she took cover.

The Piket had beaten Lena and the other police officers to the scene by seconds. Their bulky blue and white van stopped right outside the entrance. Agnes parked right behind it, so close she had to reverse to let them open the back doors of the van. Three more police cars stopped at haphazard angles in the snow behind Lena and Agnes's car.

Lena spotted trouble straight away: the entrance to Tom's office looked like white glass, but the whiteness was moving, shifting and rolling like a pale cloud behind the windows.

Car doors opened and shut as police filled the street, equipment was readied, radios hissed and cracked, voices snapped commands. The noise cut Lena's eardrums; she sensed a tremendous headache building up. She tried to ask the Piket team leader if they had surrounded the building, but her questions went unheard in the cacophony.

Then someone had fired at them.

Bullets zipped out of the white cloud, cut clean through windows, and smashed into the brickwork around the police officers. One shot tore straight through the window of a police car. Another hit an officer's hand and left one finger dangling by threads. Shattered glass and pulverized mortar rained down.

The bangs were almost inaudible over the racket; Lena felt rather than heard the impacts. She threw herself on the ground and half-dragged Agnes down with her. There had been at least seven or eight shots, and there could easily be more. The ringing around her seems to have tripled in volume.

The Piket officer next to Lena curses again. "We didn't expect this. I was told the suspect was likely to run."

"Pity no one asked me," Lena says. John is unpredictability personified. She might be able to track him, but there is no knowing what he will do next.

"Did you know he has a gun?" the Piket officer asks, looking at her.

Lena does not reply. She is not even sure it was John who fired at them, but the timing and her gut feeling agree: This is no coincidence. Somewhere in the depth of the white cloud are John and a weapon. She does not know where he found it, what type it is, or how much ammunition he has.

One thing is clear: he is not afraid to use it. In a way, it is a good sign; perhaps they have him cornered.

Agnes crouches next to Lena and leans against the car, her gun in her hands. The strange white cloud still conceals the interior of the entrance. Calls for the shooter to stand down and come out have had no result. Huddled together behind their van, the Piket team put on gas masks while two groups of police officers move to each side of the entrance, weapons drawn and aimed at the ground.

Lena overhears the Piket team leader as he gives orders: His team will fire tear gas into the entrance and enter through nearby windows in hope of cutting off the shooter's escape routes. A round of nods later, they dash away from behind the van.

One Piket officer leans around the van and levels a tear gas rifle at the entrance. He squints and begins to pull the trigger, but the team leader jumps back, bats the tear gas rifle to the side, and points to the entrance.

Dozens of people are staggering out of the smoke, blinking, gaping, and coughing. Bewildered, they stop in the middle of the street and stare at the police. One of them raises his hands slowly.

"Hold your fire," the team leader screams. He points to the people who are leaving the building. "All of you, down on the ground, now. Drop *down*, for fuck's sake."

Slowly, the stunned group obeys. One man pauses to arrange his jacket on the snow before he gingerly sits down. The Piket team leader sends his team in with a series of gestures, and the group of indignant, astonished people is dragged away from the street and into cover. Lena hears protests and raised voices demanding answers.

"What's going on?" one man shouts. "Where's the fire?"

Lena realizes that a fire alarm is blending with the din of sirens and the car alarm. She looks down the street and sees people exit from two other doors. Young women and men, smart clothes, precise haircuts. Several of them carry coffee cups. One woman holds a champagne glass. Fortunately, there are only a few dozen; had it been a weekday, the street would have been packed.

Other people crowd the street farther away, staring and pointing. An ambulance arrives, adding its wail to the cacophony as it parks well out of range of the entrance.

"We must go in," Lena says to Agnes.

"Without the Piket team?"

"Yes. No. Goddamn it, what's holding them back?"

"All the people coming out, I think. John's shots must have set off the alarm."

"Unless he set it off on purpose." Lena suspects that he did; if the street had not been filled with confused, hungover people, the police could have searched half the building by now.

"There's smoke inside the entrance," Lena says, "but I can't smell anything burning. And the smoke is too white. Do you think it's gas?"

"No idea," Agnes says. "Wait." She points to the entrance. "Look, the smoke is thinning."

Lena watches the entrance slowly emerge out of the white haze. There does not seem to be anyone inside. She turns to the Piket team leader, who

is listening closely to his radio. “Is John among the people who just came out?” she asks, knowing he will not be.

The team leader shakes his head. “No one matches the suspect.”

“What about Tom?” Lena asks. “He should be here.” Unless John has found him, in which case Tom is in trouble. Or already beyond trouble.

“Who’s Tom?” the Piket officer asks.

“Another suspect. Sort of. His full name is Tom Lundberg. If you find him, detain him.”

The Piket team leader nods. “I’ll find out if he’s around.”

“We’ve got to find John before he does something worse,” Lena says. “We don’t know what happened in there before we got here. There could be people dying or dead. Any idea what that smoke is?”

“I’d guess a fire extinguisher,” he says. “I have to go.” He leaves and joins his team behind the large van.

Two police officers seal off the street with police tape to keep bystanders away from an eventual gunman’s line of fire. Three other officers take statements from the people who left because of the fire alarm.

Precious minutes pass while Lena waits behind her car and listens to calls for the gunman to surrender. More people drift from other exits and are rounded up by the Piket. Still no sign of John.

When repeated calls for the shooter to give up have no result, the Piket finally moves in. Their leader shouts a string of commands, and his team rushes into position next to the entrance. The tear gas rifle makes a hollow *chunk* as it fires a cartridge into the hall, where it detonates in a spinning whirl of smoke.

Waiting behind the car, Lena hears the sound of running boots and glass being smashed. She looks up and sees the last member of the Piket team vanish into the fading white mist. Distant calls echo as they search room after room. No gunshots or screams. The fire alarm keeps ringing.

This is a catastrophe in the making. If the Piket team blocks John’s way or points their guns at him, John will do what he must to keep moving. People will die. John will die. She will fail.

She rises up, runs to the back of the Piket van, and snatches a gas mask from a basket. Agnes calls out behind her, but her focus is engulfed by the idea of a stand-off between John and the Piket. They do not know, cannot begin to anticipate what they are up against.

Pressing the mask against her face with one hand, she darts to the entrance, moves up to a wall, and edges towards the stairs. In here, the fire alarm is deafening. The entrance is partially filled with smoke again, though this time, it is tear gas. One lungful can bring her to her knees in a vomiting fit in an instant. Even though she presses the mask hard against her face, her eyes water as tendrils of the chemical inferno sneak under the rubber.

Holding her gun aimed down, she runs up to the landing of the first floor. The door is open. She leans in and sees part of the Piket team working their way down the corridor, securing room after room.

She is about to walk in when she hears coughing from higher up in the stairwell. A young man in a crisp shirt walks cautiously down the stairs, blinking hard and covering his mouth with his hands. He stops when he sees Lena. Behind him, more people crowd the stairwell.

“You,” Lena shouts at the man over the alarm. “Have you seen a man heading up the stairs?” She describes John in a few words.

The man stares at her gun and shakes his head. “No…one.” He coughs brutally and sways. “Just us,” he wheezes.

“Run down, out and right. Do not breathe. Don’t stop outside the entrance.” Lena raises her voice. “All of you. Move it, get out.”

She lets the parade of stunned and coughing people pass and walks into the corridor on the first floor. Not only is she worrying about John; she cannot get in the way of the Piket. Not because she might distract them, but if they thought she caused a problem and reported that to Gren, she knows what will happen.

*

John

Miriam kicks the front door open and drags John out into the night. The clearing in the forest is still there, but the wind has picked up to a gale. Trees and bushes bend in the merciless wind while leaves and snowflakes sting his skin. He turns in time to see the door in the tree slam shut in his face and disappear.

“Come on,” Miriam cries over the storm. “We’re running out of time.” As if to underline her point, the ground heaves with a deep tremor.

“So everyone keeps telling me,” John murmurs.

He begins to walk, but after a few steps, his walk turns into a jog. Anger gives him strength when he should have been exhausted. This last betrayal was so much crueller than the previous illusions, but he is past the watershed. His path is set.

They run back into the forest and continue uphill. The air is thick with the scents of sap and wet wood, but it is also lined with the stench of disinfectants, plastic, sweat and fuel. Shadows flicker and dart at the edge of his vision as if stalking him.

He keeps his eyes on the ground to avoid roots or sudden pits. As long as the movement around him does not try to stop him, he does not care. Only speed matters. Miriam has not said anything, but he knows they are fleeing from an entity much more dangerous than a barbed bush or a hidden crevice.

They burst through a hedge and stumble into a field of tall, dry grass. The artificial stenches are stronger here. In front of them is an open space that ends in a gentle curve. Farther away is a distant backdrop of treetops. They have reached the top of the hill.

At the top of the rise is an enormous, soaring tree, its trunk several strides wide. Its vast crown is lost in the darkness above. The sky is dark, but not black; it is alive with a muddled swirl of greys and blacks. He realizes they are clouds, churning and rolling, stretching from horizon to horizon. More scents come to him: damp

textiles and coffee, electricity and gasoline, alcohol and perfume. The aromas seem to waft down from the clouds, as if pulled to the ground by the raging winds.

A new tremor racks the ground. Somewhere in the forest, a tree falls with a tremendous crash. Miriam shifts from one foot to the other and bites on a fingernail.

John looks at her. “The tree?”

“Does it feel right?” Miriam asks.

John grimaces and balls his fists. “I don’t know,” he murmurs. “What if that thing is hiding up there?”

“What if it’s not?” Miriam asks.

“I can’t face that again.”

Miriam puts a hand on John’s shoulder and squeezes. “You came out on top. Nothing pisses it off more.” She pauses. “But now, it’s after the heart of the matter.”

“I don’t understand?”

“She wants me,” Miriam says. “But that doesn’t mean you’re safe. It’ll make sure your death is collateral.”

Another tree falls behind them, the crash just audible over the wind. A crescendo of crashes follows. John turns around and sees splintered trees being pushed aside. Something unseen is advancing towards them.

John turns and runs for the tree. No matter what evils might wait for him in its top, they cannot be worse than the one chasing him and Miriam. The thick grass pricks his bare feet, and the snow lashes his skin. He can hear Miriam’s quick breaths and the clink of her lantern close behind him. The presence behind them is closing in; he can feel it like a chill against his back.

He reaches the tree and stops. Up close, it is impossibly tall. Its crown is a giant network of naked branches, faintly outlined like dark veins against the grey clouds. The dark trunk is full of knots and broken branches. He knows how they will feel under his fingers; as a child, he often climbed trees like these, driven by curiosity.

The wind is building to a roaring pandemonium. Miriam watches him in silence, and he understands her solemn expression.

“This is it, right?” John shouts over the noise. “My exit.”

She nods. “Come on, get up there. Remember what you looked for at the top when you were younger.”

“You’re not coming with me.”

“I’ll delay it if I can. It’s scared. You’ve grown strong.”

“It doesn’t sound scared to me.”

“Don’t prove me wrong. And don’t worry about me. I’ll be around.” She flashes a forced grin and pushes John towards the tree.

“It will kill you.”

Miriam shrugs. “Maybe,” she shouts. “I know its bag of petty tricks. We’ve gone toe to toe before.”

John wants to ask what she means but knows he is running out of time. He puts his hands on the stub of a branch and tries its strength. It is sturdier than he thought.

“Godspeed, John.” Miriam salutes him and bites her lip, then turns away and runs into the tempest.

Steeling himself, John starts to climb.

*

Lena

Trailing behind the Piket team, Lena watches them search the floor, opening every door, investigating every cupboard, eliminating all hiding spaces. No John. The team declares the area clear and extends the sweep to other floors.

Lena puts her hand on the arm of a hulking Piket officer as he jogs by. He stops and stares hard at her from behind his mask.

“What?” he asks.

Lena points to the emergency exit at the end of the corridor. “Couldn’t the shooter have left that way?”

“That door’s jammed. It won’t budge. If we can’t get it open, the shooter couldn’t. We need to secure the rest of the floors before we force the door open.”

“Jammed?”

“You should be outside.”

Lena removes her hand, and the man runs out into the stairwell. She is alone.

Her hands are shaking badly. John is gone, vanished again. The certainty troubles her in so many ways she feels sick. His absence is as palpable as lack of air, as clear as if she could reach out and touch the vacant space where he had been.

She can hear herself explain the idea to Gren. *Yes, I can sense him when he’s close. I’m clairvoyant, obviously. Here’s my idea for a costume and a cape. Or a straitjacket.*

Breathing slowly in her mask, she leans back against a wall and wonders if her deteriorating mental health is the root of all her recent thoughts. When the wall that separates a fragile mind from a broken one is breached, how will she know? Did it feel like an epiphany in reverse? A slight vertigo and then an endless fall?

The voice she heard in the bathroom haunts her. Perhaps that fateful raid had chased away Lena’s sanity and left her behind like an

empty shell, ready to be filled by something more sinister. The thought has crossed her mind more than once.

Shaking herself, she continues down the corridor towards the emergency exit. Her palms are soaked with sweat. Halfway down the corridor, papers and catalogues clutter the floor in the otherwise neat office. She kicks the papers to the side and advances on the door with her gun raised. Her fingers are away from the trigger; her nerves are electrified, and she flinches at every imagined hint of movement.

When she reaches the door, she peeks through its window down into the stairwell. Spiral stairs, alarm bell on the wall, a dull soft glow of daylight from the door below. No John.

She lowers her gun and pulls the handle. As the Piket officer said, the door is stuck. She cannot find any locks or latches barring the door, but she cannot open it. The door feels as if it has been welded into its frame.

When her fingers brush against the wall near the lock, she pulls her hand back with a start. Crouching slowly, she leans closer, lifts her mask up, and sniffs.

Glue.

She rushes out of the office, down the stairs, and through the smoke. Once she is outside, she rips off her mask and stops in front of Agnes. When she opens her mouth to speak, all she manages is a bout of dry coughing.

“Back door,” Lena eventually croaks, blinking and resting her hands on her knees. “John.”

Agnes puts a hand on Lena’s shoulder to keep her from keeling over. “John’s at the back door?” she asks and glances down at Lena’s hand.

“No, he’s – *shit*.” Lena coughs and grimaces. Her sluggish mind reminds her that she is still holding her gun, and she tries to holster it discreetly. “He’s gone. Tell the Piket to go around the building.”

“They already have.” Agnes gestures at the far end of the block. “They sent a small team just after they hauled those people away. I don’t think they saw the suspect.”

Lena closes her eyes. Snow settles on her hair while she stands still. Her energy ebbs out of her. “Not again,” she whispers. “We

were so close. What about Tom?”

“Sorry,” Agnes says. “He’s not here. The Piket checked everyone. I’ll talk to them again.”

“Call the headquarters and have them put up road blocks,” Lena says. “Get the underground trains not to stop at–” She tries to remember the name of the nearest station, but her memory fails her. Her body is starting to rebel against the prolonged push; she is tired, exhausted, and her headache sends splinters of light through her cranium. And she is hungry.

“I know what to do,” Agnes assures Lena, then walks away and raises her phone.

Lena slumps against the car, crosses her arms on the roof, and rests her head. She tries to shut out the turmoil and plan. Tom is gone: A relief and a problem in one sentence. The man has not been found mutilated, which is a boon, but he is also missing. He could have left before Lena or John got to the office, but then John too would have left. Which, she realises, is precisely what he did.

She turns to look at the subdued and frozen group of people that ran out when the fire alarm went off. With luck, one of them knows where Tom is. Rubbing her cold hands, she walks over to the group.

“Who here works for Lundberg Invest?” she asks. “I know some of you do, so just raise your hands. Now, if you will.”

A few seconds pass without anyone putting their hand up, then a dark woman in a grey office suit waves cautiously at Lena.

Lena jerks her head. “Come with me.”

“Wait.” The woman looks terrified. “I don’t work for them.”

“Then why the hell did you raise your hand?”

“I just – I know some of them, and they’re not here.”

“That’s funny, because I know they are.”

“They were,” the woman says and points at the office. “I talked with – um, some of them earlier today, and they’ve gone on a conference.”

Lena knows the woman does not want to say with whom she talked. Lundberg Invest will be worth looking into, but that will have to wait. “Where?” she asks.

“I don’t know.”

“Then who does?” Lena’s patience hangs on a thread.

“Katarina. She’ll know.”

Lena stares at the woman until she goes on.

“Ah, she’s the receptionist,” the woman continues. She turns around and looks at the group around her. “Katarina? Are you here?”

A chorus of shrugs and turning heads tells Lena the receptionist is missing. “Was she in today?” she asks.

The woman nods. “Perhaps she left when the alarm went off.”

“Have you got her number?”

The woman gives Lena a phone number. Lena calls, but there is no answer. She tries the number dialled from the phone booth. Voicemail. Raising her eyes to the sky, she breathes out slowly. There has to be a quick way to find out where they are.

“Agnes?” Lena shouts.

“I’m right here,” Agnes calls and jogs over to Lena.

“Tell someone to get in touch with an employee at Lundberg Invest. We need to know where they are, and where they’re going.”

“Got it.”

Lena walks towards the entrance. The teargas prickles her eyes and her sinuses, but it has dissipated enough for her to breathe freely. She studies the patterns of white powder in the broken glass that covers the floor. On the floor near the desk are two bullet cases. They are almost as thick as her thumb. A sweat breaks out on her neck.

Agnes appears by her side. “I’ve called,” she says. “They’re working on it. What’s happening?”

“The receptionist knows where Tom is,” Lena explains, “but she’s disappeared. I’m going to have a look at her desk.” She walks around the desk and sees the broken monitor. “Oh, bloody hell.”

Agnes follows her gaze. “John did that?”

“It could be.” Lena wonders if John has taken the receptionist with him, or if she is hiding somewhere in the office.

“That must be her handbag.” Agnes points to a brown leather bag slung over the back of the office chair.

Lena upends the bag on the desk. Make-up, wallet, hair brush, tissue, pepper spray, and a mobile phone. Its screen is lit. She picks it

up and sees her own phone number. Unless the receptionist has fled, she is either with John or somewhere in the office.

Or John has silenced her and hid her himself. The image of Niklas glued to a wardrobe door flashes through her mind.

Lena runs out with the phone in her hand and shouts for the Piket team leader. Outside the police tape barricade, hundreds of people gawk at the scene. Almost everyone is clad in hues of black and grey, hands deep in pockets or holding mobile phones and cameras. Part funeral gathering, part voyeur convention. She wishes she could hijack the Piket van and run them all down.

The Piket team leader stands next to the officers who monitor the people who have left the building. He looks up at Lena with a shadow of annoyance on his face.

“The receptionist’s gone,” Lena says. “I think John’s taken her.”

The team leader makes a hushing gesture. Lena is about to tell him she can be as loud as she damn well pleases but then realizes her mistake: One of the spectators murmurs *hostage*, and the word races around the crowd. Thumbs work touch screens manically as the news is passed on. Half the city will know in minutes. The press will be here in no time. Pictures of the scene will already be descending on blogs and newspapers.

A crease forms on the team leader’s forehead – the closest he comes to a scowl, Lena supposes – and he motions for Lena to follow him in behind the van. Out of earshot, he asks her to tell him more.

“The woman is gone,” Lena says impatiently, “but her bag’s still there. Her computer screen has been smashed.” She stabs with her index finger at the building and speaks through her teeth. “John. Has. Her. Or at least he’s the reason she’s gone. Trust me on this one.”

Glancing at the office, he nods. “We’ll do another sweep.” He barks a series of commands in his radio and turns to leave.

“Sweep?” Lena runs around him and stops in his path. “John’s already gone. We need to start looking for him.”

“Do you have any idea where he is?” The team leader locks eyes with Lena. His voice is hushed but strained. “Because if you haven’t, I’m not going to waste time searching every bloody block. My

priority is time and the safety of my team. We have called in the National Task Force, and they're mobilising as we speak. They'll go in as soon as the suspect is sighted again."

Lena's headache intensifies. With the National Task Force deployed, all bets were off, and John's chances to escape shrank to almost nil. He could get away with overwhelming and kidnapping unprepared individuals, but the task force was another beast entirely.

And they were not discreet. The press would chase them like dogs. Rumours would fly wild.

"Where exactly would they go in?" Lena demands. "John's gone, and the task force aren't searching for him. I am."

The Piket team leader leans close to Lena's face. "Then I suggest you better start looking, Detective."

Lena opens and closes her mouth, then turns away. Everyone is losing their mind. Perhaps John is to blame: Molly's elusive avenger is turning into a void that will claim them all. A human black hole swallowing the unwary.

She stalks back to her car and finds Agnes sitting in the passenger seat and speaking on her phone. Agnes looks up at Lena and shakes her head: No sign of John. Thirty minutes have passed since the shots were fired. John can be in Stockholm proper, and all Lena can do is wait for someone to spot him.

Looking at the entrance, a thought comes to her. She knocks on the car window to get Agnes's attention and motions for her to hang up.

After a few seconds, Agnes lowers the side window. "There's no sign of him so far," she says.

"You're good with computers." Lena has long since learned that her own temper disagrees with the tardiness of technology, while Agnes is happy to wait minutes for a computer to open a file.

Agnes frowns. "A little. Why?"

"Can you make the receptionist's computer work?"

"Maybe, if it's just the screen that's broken."

"You'd need a new screen?"

"That might do it. The computer itself didn't look broken, but I didn't look close–"

“I’ll find a screen.” Lena waits while the Piket team files into the office to search again and follows them up the stairs. One of them turns to look at her, but Lena waves apologetically and mumbles about double-checking a detail.

Once they are inside the vacated office, she ducks into a room, yanks the cables out of the smallest monitor she finds, and carries it downstairs, its cables trailing behind her. She prays the forensic team has not arrived yet. If Gren hears of what she is doing, he will fire her on the spot.

Agnes waits for Lena behind the desk downstairs. The computer hums under the table; Agnes has managed to start it up. The crowd outside seems impossibly large. A news broadcast team moves among the people. Their camera’s spotlight flashes over Lena, and she crouches behind the desk.

“It works,” Agnes says and kneels down next to Lena. “I’m not even logged out. Do you want me to check recent documents?”

“Anything that helps,” Lena says quietly.

Agnes nods and turns to the computer. Lena’s eyes stray to the spent bullet casings on the floor, left there by John when he released the salvo towards the police outside.

She wishes she knew what had gone through his head while the bullets crossed the distance between his hand and the police. Fury, hate, terror, confusion or glee. So many options. What she fears the most is that he felt nothing.

“Here,” Agnes says and points to the screen. “These are the documents used today. The most recent one looks like a ticket – oh, look.”

“What?” Lena can tell from Agnes’s expression that she has found something. A camera flashes outside. Police officers order some overly curious spectators to move back.

“This was viewed just before we got here,” Agnes says.

Lena looks at the screen. A mass of pink and blue boxes filled with text and data. “It’s a flight ticket,” she says and leans closer. “In Tom’s name. From Arlanda, this afternoon. When was it last opened?”

Agnes scrolls down. “Not long before you tried calling the office.”

They look at each other. Arlanda: Sweden’s largest airport. Five terminals, hundreds of corridors and thousands of people. And soon John, armed and hunting.

“The car,” Lena breathes. “Now.”

*

John

John drives towards the airport.

He follows the slow flow of the traffic past rolling fields dotted by barns, country cottages, radio masts and copses of pine and spruce worn by hard wind and rain. Heavy clouds create an artificial dusk over the landscape as the blizzard regroups for a renewed attack on the city.

Gusts pummel and push at the car, threatening to force it off the highway and into the ditch, but he keeps it steady, overtaking other vehicles only when safe. At his current speed, a collision would at best cripple John, but it would give Tom time to escape. There will be no more escapes. Not for Tom, not for John.

“Sir?” says the man cowering on the floor in the back of the car. “Where are we going?”

“I told you to be quiet,” John says. “I’m in a hurry. If you distract me, I’ll stop by the roadside and make sure you won’t do it again.”

“Please,” the man begs. “I have kids.”

“Then you have a good incentive to do as I say.”

“Okay. I will be quiet. I promise.”

A film of snow screens the meadows and groves that line the road. Soon, driving will be difficult and even slower. John competes with both time and climate.

He touches the handle of the knife in his bag to reassure himself the weapon is there. His arsenal is reduced: On his way out of the city, he parked by the roadside and tried to reload the gun, out of sight of his hostage, but he cannot understand how to open the weapon. It is a setback, but he has the knife and his hands. That will have to do.

Twenty minutes earlier, John exited Tom’s office building, crossed the road, and walked down a long, narrow street between blocks of old and luxurious flats. Less than a minute after he closed the emergency exit door behind him, he passed a middle-aged man who was loading slalom skis into a Packline mounted on a white Volvo SUV. There was no one nearby.

John stopped and waited until the man reached for his gloves in the backseat, then walked and pressed his knife to the man’s body.

To many, guns are things of fiction that do not belong in humdrum life. Their reaction to seeing one might be delayed. But a blade that pricks a soft part of your body is an immediate, physical threat that leaves no room for doubt or debate. John ordered the man to get in the car, and a minute later they were on their way out of Stockholm.

John passes the first of the many signposts for the different airport terminals. By the time he reaches the turn to the fifth terminal, the heavy snowfall cuts visibility to less than a hundred meters.

He overtakes a car and drives faster. Tom is an imaginary dot on the horizon, His personal, offensive North Star, the beacon of his journey.

Soon John will extinguish it.

*

Lena

Lena ignores the gawking onlookers as she runs to her car. All she sees are obstacles slowing her down: a crowd, slippery snow, the closed door, finding the car key. As soon as the engine roars to life, she slams into first gear. Agnes barely manages to get in the passenger seat before the car is in motion.

Ahead are more hindrances: parked cars, ambulances, mounds of snow, and a fire engine that has materialized without her noticing. She flicks the siren on, sounds the horn, and keeps going down the street. Screams and curses follow her as the car shoots past stunned people, brushing against legs and jackets.

She veers onto the busy plaza and almost slides sideways into a bus. Both lanes are full of cars. The fastest are moving at walking speed.

“Double back,” Agnes says. “Then straight ahead. Past the intersection.”

Lena circles the block, drives out onto a wider street, cuts off a taxi, and shoots past a local bus. She zigzags through the lanes, overtaking cars and trucks. The traffic is still light, and the drivers in front of her try to clear the road, but the traffic seems to move in slow motion.

She wills her car to go faster and magically close the gap between her and John. Fashion shops, restaurants, travel agencies and cafés form a glossy neon blur on her left and right. In the wake, a cascade of dirty snow sprays nearby pedestrians.

Agnes takes Lena’s radio and rattles off reports to the central command, the Piket and Gren, pausing to give Lena directions. Lena tries to listen in, but in her mind, she is already at the airport. John is heading into a net he cannot escape. If he enters any of the terminals, he will be caught; the exits are easily monitored, and there are CCTV cameras everywhere. If he turns back, the roads will be cut off.

“Have you called the airport yet?” Lena asks Agnes.

“Gren’s doing it now. He said he’ll call you too.”

“Why?”

“He didn’t say.”

They pass under a series of viaducts, and century-old buildings give way to scattered office blocks, lush parkland and small lakes. Lena enters the motorway and glances at the clock. Eight minutes since they left the scene. How fast would John drive? At what speed will someone without fear, doubt or self-perseverance travel? She accelerates and grips the steering wheel harder.

Snowflakes whip off the windscreen and wash over the car. The sky ahead is a wall of deep blue clouds; before long, the road will be a stretch of darkness blurred by waves of snow. She feels as if she drives vertically, heading down a cliff.

She passes a lumbering coach and is about to change lanes when her phone rings. Knowing who the caller will be, she takes the call without looking at the display.

"Speak loudly," she shouts over the siren.

"It's Gren here. You know why I'm calling."

"You want to tell me not to go in alone?"

"Stay away from the terminals entirely. The National Task Force are on their way with a hostage negotiator. They will probably pass over you soon. The airport police have been notified."

"Tell them to be discreet. John will fire if threatened. He won't back down."

"Agnes told me what you found on the computer." Gren pauses. "Are you sure he's heading to the airport?"

"Completely."

"And that he's got a hostage?"

"I think John took the receptionist with him to keep her from telling anyone where he went." That was a best-case scenario; John had demonstrated that he knew other ways to silence those in his path. Her radio beeps, and she hands it to Agnes for her to answer.

"Have you stopped the airport trains?" Lena asks Gren.

"The trains and the coaches are informed. John won't get on them without us knowing. The airport's been notified, and they're calling for Tom over the PA. We tried to contact Tom directly, but his phone is switched off. We've left a message."

"His whole bloody company is there. Someone must have a working phone. Try to text him."

“We’ve tried that. We’re looking up the others in his company. Don’t worry. Soon we’ll have a number; then we’ll talk to Tom and make sure he’s out of harm’s way. We have a few questions for him.”

“What about the task force?” Lena asks. “If John runs into them before they can disarm him or pick up Tom, it’ll get ugly.”

“No one’s going to get hurt.”

Lena does not reply; she is distracted by Agnes, who motions for Lena to take the radio. “I have to go,” she tells Gren. She hangs up and takes the radio. “Who is it?” she whispers to Agnes.

“The Piket team leader.”

Lena grimaces and takes the radio. Most likely, he wants to reprimand her for interfering with their search. “Franke here,” she says and braces herself.

“We have the receptionist.”

Lena loses control of the car. The vehicle careens into the adjacent lane, but Agnes throws herself at the wheel and turns it the other way, narrowly avoiding an oncoming minibus. Agnes keeps hold of the steering wheel until she sees that Lena is in control of herself again.

“How?” Lena asks. Is she wrong? Is John still in the city while Lena races farther away on a ghost hunt? If so, she has directed all the search effort towards a blind spot.

“She was tied up and hidden in a storage space in the corridor. Some kind of built-in wardrobe. The suspect had glued a framed painting over the hinges.”

“Bloody hell,” Lena breathes.

“That’s why we missed her during the first sweep. The glue’s probably the same he used to jam the emergency exit. And on that other man. I heard about it.”

Lena’s numbness turns to a cold. “Did he–”

“He glued the painting to the wall, that’s all. The woman’s mouth was duct taped. She’s okay. But she refuses to talk.”

“Why?”

He clears his throat. “Shock, I think. We’re trying to get information out of her, but she won’t talk about the suspect. Just shakes her head. We’ve got an ambulance here to bring her in.”

“Damn it, she’s the last one who’s seen John. Hasn’t she said anything useful?”

“Just one thing.” A pause. “She said Tom’s dead.”

The tornado of thoughts in Lena’s head picks up speed. Had John killed Tom and hidden him too? That cannot be right; the woman outside the office said Tom had left by the time Lena and Agnes got there.

“Tom can’t be dead,” Lena says. “That doesn’t fit.”

“He’s not. We’ve asked around, and we’re positive Tom’s at the airport.”

“Make some goddamned sense, will you?”

“I’m guessing here.” The Piket team leader’s patient voice is laden with static. “But I think she meant that Tom is as good as dead.”

Lena looks into the distance. “I understand.”

A distant thudding growl on her left makes her look out the window. Two bulky military helicopters scythe through the low clouds, heading north parallel with the highway. The National Task Force, rushing towards the airport.

“Make sure she’s safe. And don’t push her too hard. Out.” She drops the radio on the floor and drives faster.

*

John

John arrives at the airport.

On his right is terminal five, a vast complex of steel and glass. Across the street is a large circular parking house. Buses and cars compete for space outside the sliding doors as travellers march between the buildings or wrestle their luggage into baggage compartments. Hard winds funnel snow between the buildings and into unzipped jackets, tax-free shopping bags and squinting eyes. A plane takes off, the flat thunder of its jet engines temporarily drowning out all other sounds.

John drives slowly between coaches and taxis while he studies the area. Near the middle entrance are three police cars. They are parked not immediately outside the doors, but close enough for the officers inside the cars to monitor the entrance. Inside the terminal are security guards eyeing everyone who passes through the doors. The alarm has been raised.

He considers the gun in his bag and the number of police officers he has seen. Once, he travelled to Spain for a week on the Canary Islands, leaving a balmy, sun-drenched Stockholm for six days of incessant rain and one day of blasting sunshine that burned his face lobster red.

The flight had left from Arlanda. He recalls the passport controls, security gates and locked doors, but his memories are old, separated from today by a decade of terrorism paranoia and several airport extensions. He knows at which gate Tom is supposed to be, but not how many officers and barriers he would encounter if he tries to reach Tom by speed and force. When he last travelled, the passport control alone had consisted of two doors of bulletproof glass. It would be even more secure today.

He needs a new plan.

Watching out for police cars, he drives past the terminal and parks the car a few minutes walking distance from the entrances.

“What are you doing?” the man in the back seat asks.

“I’m leaving the car,” John says. “You will stay here. Keep in mind that I know your address. If I see you anywhere outside this car, I will go to your home, and I will use my knife on your family.”

The man tenses, and John raises the gun a fraction. Mentioning the man's family was reckless; he has pushed the father too far. A fight in the car could draw attention and could ruin John's plan.

"I've changed my mind," John says. "Wait here for an hour; then you can do what you want. You won't see me again."

"Fine," the man says after a moment. "I'll stay."

John takes the man's mobile phone and his wallet. He will have to move fast, so he puts the sheathed knife in a pocket and leaves his bag in the car.

He shuts the car door and walks towards the distant terminal, a blur of shadows and neon in the thick snowfall. His hand throbs fiercely, and his gait is unsteady. Those are bad signs, but he will last a little longer.

John passes rows of cars buried under snow, waits while a group of people pull their luggage across his path, and walks up to the parking house opposite the terminal. Stopping in a shadow, he pretends to make a phone call while he looks around.

The police cars are still there. Two officers inside, middle-aged men. They talk and laugh, but their eyes are watchful, nervous. Above him, another jet roars and fades into a remote growl.

John takes out the phone he took from the man in the car and texts Tom.

Run cops r coming got car outside / Niklas

While John waits for a reply, he hears far-off sirens slowly coming closer.

The phone rings. An anonymous caller. John kills the call and texts Tom again.

Cant speak cops close run

The reply comes quickly. *Cops just called n said theres trouble. Some fuck looking 4 me.*

It's a trap. Avoid cops n security.

The sirens are a fraction closer when Tom replies.

Fuck ill kill him where r u

Parking house run dont let cops see u, John texts back.

A new message from Tom. *Stay there*.

John walks into the parking house and looks for a place to hide. Cars enter and leave in a steady stream, but there is an alcove in the back cloaked in deep shadow. He leans against the wall inside the entrance and waits.

Three minutes later, John sees Tom exit the terminal.

Tom resembles the passport photo, but he is taller than John expects. Grey suit, pink shirt, brown leather belt and matching shoes. His black hair is ruffled by stress and wind. He walks slowly but fidgets with his wristwatch and looks over his shoulder.

John knows Tom's face is flushed from more than anxiety: One moment Tom is heading for a day of drinks and negotiations, the next he is fleeing like a squirrel exposed on a field. When Tom sees a police car, he turns around, crosses the street behind a coach, and heads for the parking house again.

John watches Tom come closer.

When Tom is a few moments away, John retreats back into the parking house and runs to the alcove. The small space is a bin storage with no door. It is sooty, cramped, and reeks of old garbage. Cars drive past up on the curved ramps that lead to the upper floors.

John presses himself to the wall inside and holds the knife behind his back. If he is right, he will look like a shadow when seen from the entrance, and Niklas would have all reason to hide. By the time Tom is close enough to see John's face, it will be too late.

Tom enters the parking house. He pauses in the entrance, runs his hands through his hair, and looks around. John pulls himself deeper into the shadow and calls out, trying to sound coarse and discreet. When Tom does not notice, John calls again, louder.

Tom starts and peers at the shadow where John hides. "Niklas?" he calls. "Where are you? Stop fucking around."

"I'm here," John says. "Come, quickly."

Tom hesitates, curses, and runs over to the alcove.

John pulls back again.

The knife is in his hand. In a moment, Tom will be inside the alcove; John hears the man's heavy breathing, the crush of gravel under his soles, the rustle of his suit.

Tom steps inside and sees John. "What the–"

No speech precedes John's attack. There is no elaboration on righteousness or scornful remark, no smirk or victorious gesture. Justice fills John's mind, but he has no need to flaunt his triumph.

He has a weapon, a target and a goal. Severing the chain that hurt him is the purpose of his existence; beyond that, nothing matters. A chase, a stab,

and then peace.

But Tom twists to the side, and John’s knife cuts through empty air. John follows with a sideways stab, but Tom blocks John’s arm and drives his fist into John’s abdomen.

John drops the knife, falls backwards into the wall, and slumps down on the grimy floor, coughing and retching.

*

Tom

Tom picks up the knife and looks down on John, wondering who the chubby, ill-dressed pretender hitman is. He has plenty of enemies, ranging from wealthy competitors vying for his circle of sub-dealers to former friends who feel cheated or betrayed for whatever reason.

But this? Come on.

Whoever sent this would-be assassin does not know Tom. This man is a joke. Tom's body is trimmed to perfection by countless hours in VIP gyms and three kinds of illegal anabolic substances, whereas this man looks like a car sales rep on a bad diet. The attack had been beyond clumsy, too; Tom had taken down better fighters a decade ago when he roamed the suburbs as a teenager.

Nevertheless, the man at his feet is a sure sign of trouble. So are the police. While a constant presence at Arlanda, there are many more officers around now than a few minutes ago. Tom wonders if they are searching for him, the useless knifeman, or both of them?

He looks out of the alcove. No one close. Cars drive past only a few steps away; however the space is too dark for any driver to see what goes on inside.

Tom crouches next to John, grabs John's jacket, and hoists him off the ground. "Getting me out here was clever," Tom spits in John's face. "I should've known the texts were fake; Niklas's spelling is even worse than yours. Now pay attention." With a quick punch he breaks John's nose.

"You're going to tell me who sent you," Tom says. "You have three seconds before I write my autograph in your puffy face with your own knife." He waves the blade in front of John. "One. Two. Three. Your loss."

Tom cuts a deep gash in John's forehead. Blood wells up and runs back into John's hair, but John does not make a sound. A calm stare is his only response while he shifts slightly in Tom's grip. Tom frowns. Maybe the man is a professional after all, only a bad one.

"Let's try again," Tom says. "This time, I'll take one of your eyes. Let's see if you can stonewall that. One. Two. What was that?"

John mumbles a word and coughs blood; his broken nose has flooded his mouth. He shifts again and lies still.

“Speak louder,” Tom barks and slaps John’s face. Sirens blare in the distance. He has to move on soon. “Start talking. Who sent you?”

John mumbles again, but the sentence is lost in a wet gargle. “Who?” Tom demands and leans closer to John’s mouth.

John speaks again, and this time his voice is clear and level. He says one word, close to Tom’s ear.

“Molly.”

John twists and runs a hand-sized shard of glass into Tom’s face, through his cheek, and into his mouth.

*

John

John rolls away while Tom rears up and screams, his howl coming out more like a long, thick sneeze. The knife clatters to the ground. John tries to kick at Tom's legs, but Tom stumbles away, rips out the shard of smudged glass stuck in his cheek, and stares at it with an incredulous look on his face, as if he has discovered a childhood treasure. Blood pours from the gash and down his shirt.

"Fuck," Tom gurgles. "Oh my – *fuck*." He stares at John with the eyes of a panicked animal.

John picks up the knife, rises slowly, and meets Tom's eyes.

Tom turns and runs.

John staggers to his feet and follows Tom. Had it not been for the piece of glass that his fingers had found among the filth on the floor, he would have been too wounded to go on, but the thought is no comfort. Tom is alive. The balance is still wrong.

His forehead throbs with pain, and blood trickles into his eyes, but he keeps running. Ahead, Tom zigzags between cars like a stricken rat. John is seconds behind. People stop and stare. The police officers in the cars frown and point. Sirens moan between the buildings. A helicopter thunders above.

Tom screams in panic, and John runs faster.

John expects Tom to flee into the terminal, but instead he sprints along parked buses and cars, away from the lights. From behind comes the crackle of a megaphone, followed by high-pitched commands to stand still.

Tom passes a line of taxi cars, barrels through people queuing outside a coach, turns into the street, and disappears from John's view. John shoves bewildered travellers out of his way and rounds the corner, giving it some berth in case Tom tries to ambush him.

When he catches sight of Tom again, Tom is dragging a man out of a car. John sprints towards the car, but before he reaches it, Tom hops in, slams the door, and speeds down the road in a spray of wet snow. The man whose car Tom stole stands next to John and mumbles incoherently.

More commands are shouted in the megaphone. The helicopter is coming closer. A few hundred metres away are flaring blue lights. Police cars, approaching fast.

John runs up to the last car in the taxi line and tries to open the driver's door, but it is locked. The driver inside shouts and waves. John ignores him, runs to the next car, and tests the door. This one too is locked. He runs to the third car, and the driver's door swings open.

The driver, a young, red-haired man, shouts out in surprise and looks up at John. A large newspaper is spread over the dashboard. The stereo plays heavy metal on low volume.

John shoves his knife under the man's jaw and tells him to leave the keys and get out. The man blinks, nods, undoes the safety belt, and crawls out of the vehicle.

John starts the car, does a U-turn, and races after Tom.

*

John

John climbs through a whirlwind of ripping winds. Strong gusts try to pluck him from the tree and fling him into the night, but he clings on, keeping his eyes on the next foothold. Somewhere below, the creature of ice and loss is still coming for him. Above is an exit. A way out of his nightmare. A portal to sanity. The idea infuses him with strength.

A quick glance down makes him hold on tighter to the tree: The forest is a giant hemisphere of rustling gloom. The field is a small pale patch far below his feet. He climbs as fast as he can, but he cannot have come this far so soon. Stranger still is the heat: The air should be colder, but he is sweating with the effort.

And he is nowhere near the top; above him, the tree stretches away like a vertical path into the heavens. The crown is as wide as a landscape, a dizzying myriad of twists and forks. At the periphery of the crown, its naked branches thin out and puncture the clouds, giving him the impression that he is scaling a blood vessel that feeds into a heaving, organic mass.

He glances down again and almost loses his hold; climbing far below is the creature that posed as Molly. Moving snake-like along the tree, it comes nearer, slicing away twigs as it coils and curls around the trunk. It is still wearing the guise of her, but he knows what hides beneath.

Shutting out the sight, John climbs on, digging his fingers into the coarse bark. The fall to the ground would be as long as a lifetime. If the beast that poses as Molly snags his feet, he is doomed.

The sky brightens shade by shade, and the ground under him blends with the surrounding night until the forest no longer is visible. The tree could have grown from nothing into nothing. His world is simplified: Brightness above, darkness below, and an endless tree bridging the two domains. And, not far below, an entity bent on turning him into a frozen husk.

Sheer hunger for life keeps John going: He has seen too much to falter between abyss and absolution. Another urgency joins the first: Beyond the exit, on the other side of the strange sky, a catastrophe is in the making, and only he can stop it. If he gets there too late, there will be more pain.

The tree shudders, and John grips the branches hard. He looks down and sees the creature mere seconds behind him. For a second, a savage terror envelops him, but he channels the dread into strength and climbs furiously. Branch after branch passes by until he is inside the crown, surrounded by limbs arching away for miles into emptiness.

Grunting and cursing, he pulls himself onto the next branch and realizes the trunk is tapering. The branches around him become smaller and less stable. He pauses to look up only when he notices the change in the light: the grey dusk has changed into a restless pale sea, a map of boiling streams and whirlpools the colour of crushed ice. Either he is inside the clouds, or he has passed through them and is looking at another, more distant sky.

Snowflakes zip past his face while contours and movements emerge, faint, blurred shapes solidifying into outlines and objects. From somewhere comes the long rumble of massive engines. He shields his eyes and squints. Above him are sleek, oblong shapes; between them, straight lines of tiny glowing lights.

The sight is strangely familiar, but he is too light-headed to make sense of what he sees, and there is a tingling sensation in his stomach. He looks down at the tree’s magnificent crown. The network of branches has thinned out to a fine web around and below him. He has reached the top.

As if triggered by the epiphany, his world revolves.

John clings harder to the tree when, without warning, the ground’s pull alters to a push. Suddenly, the darkness of the abyss is above him, while the storming whiteness, the scents and the shapes are far below. He waits for the vertigo to pass, but the reversal of gravity stays. One moment he is trying to avoid falling down; the next he holds on to the topmost branches not to plummet into the sky.

He begins to climb back up, but slips and hangs dangling, suspended over the clouds by a twig. Far below is solid ground, or something akin to it, but a fall would be lethally long.

He tries to pull himself up, but his body could have been made of stone. A quick, heavy thudding rises on the air. Perhaps another beast coming for him. If that is the case, he wonders what he will face this time. A dragon of rose thorns, a chimera of barbed wire, a translucent wolf of grief. Nothing will surprise him ever again.

The roar keeps coming closer. He frowns and looks down; the sound is artificial, impossibly loud but also monotonous and wheezing. Images of winged shapes leap into his mind.

Airplanes.

The roar comes from a helicopter. He is hanging above an airport. The box-like shapes are terminals and hangars, the bands of pearls in the white haze are runway lights. Even this high up, the reek of jet fuel is strong. Small blurred dots mill on one of the runways: Cars and people, mites of black in the white.

It makes as much sense as anything else he has encountered lately. All he can do is roll with the whims and hope to survive. Nothing would matter if he drops down; the ground is closer than it had been moments before, though a fall will still be deadly.

He tries to pull himself up again and makes a strangled sound. A few metres above him in the now upturned trunk is the creature that poses as Molly. Its face a pale moon against the black sky.

“Bloody hell,” John whispers. He expects it to close the distance in a flash and lash out at him, but it stays still. The branch he clutches starts to slide through his fingers.

“Still trying to flee the inevitable?” Its sneer contorts the stolen features. “You never were one to pick the winning side.”

“Fuck off.” John gasps as one of his hands slips from the branch. He has seconds before his other hand will slip. With the creature barring his way, he cannot even attempt to climb up. “Where’s Miriam?”

“Gone.” The woman pauses. “Forever, this time.”

“Liar,” John says. The woman’s hesitation tipped him off, and her contemptuous smile convinces him.

At least Miriam is alive. That is something. As for exactly where she is, he does not care. Glancing down, he sees the ground even closer. Scattered among the jewel strings of the runways are people moving erratically, running, pausing and doubling back. Some way away is a large helicopter, its engine running.

The creature edges closer. “I’m your last chance now. You can have another chance by my side, or drop into endless pain.”

“Go away.”

“Come on, John. It mustn’t end like this.”

John turns away in disgust. Had the experiences from the nightmare version of Molly’s flat not still lingered with him, he would have been tempted to reach for the creature, to grasp for another chance to be close to the woman he had lost, no matter how perverted a shadow it was.

But Molly is gone. The spectre above him is a foul mirage. Under its mask is the sum of all that Molly hated: Coldness, malevolence, and apathy.

He draws the cold air into his lungs. “A drop to more pain?” he asks.

“And worse,” the creature promises. “Grief and disappointment. Broken ties and savaged hopes.”

John nods. “So going back means keeping on feeling.” He phrases his words like a question, but the answer comes to him before the creature replies.

“You get it at last.” It reaches down for him with a hand. “Now stop this idiocy, and come with me.”

John looks the creature in its eyes. “Then life,” he says, “is down there.”

It smiles. “Precisely.” The grin falters as it realises its mistake, but the realisation is too late.

John lets go of the branch.

The creature reaches out for John as he drops away, but its hands grasp air. John looks up as he falls and watches the creature’s face disappear behind the curtain of night. Its enraged grimace is the last he sees, but its scream follows him on his descent, ringing in his head until the sound is lost in the piercing whistle of the wind.

*

Lena

When Lena arrives at Arlanda Airport, her mood matches the blizzard.

She drives up the ramp that leads up to terminal five to the chorus of sirens and the thudding snarl of the helicopter. Her plan is to make sure John is inside the building and then seal off every window and vent until no one and nothing can escape. After that, they will turn the terminal upside down until they find John.

She hates airports. Not because she dislikes flying, although being stuck inside an airborne canister with hundreds of complaining drunks is not her idea of a good time. The reason she loathes airports is they are big labyrinths located too far from everything else. She is always late getting to them, and when she arrives, she inevitably gets lost.

Now this nightmarish chase will come to a conclusion either in the airport's maze of corridors or in the snow outside. She hopes for the latter.

Both Lena and Agnes have been silent for the past ten minutes. Lena has fought to control the tumult of fear, anger and priorities in her head. Agnes looks out the window as if in a trance. The woman's face could be made from marble.

On a different day, Lena would have been worried, but only John matters now. She feels the tug of the imagined string stronger than ever. If the name-callers back at the office found out, they would have a field day. Lena the mind-reading cop. The psychic psycho.

A string of police cars caught up with her on her way to the airport, including the Piket van. The airport's own security staff and police force have moved into positions to make sure John or Tom cannot leave or enter the airport unnoticed. Extra personnel monitor the CCTV for hints of either of the two.

A helicopter with an infrared scanner circles the airport, waiting for instructions, and a military helicopter with the national task force onboard is minutes from landing inside the compound. A small army against one injured ordinary man. And still she worries.

Lena pokes Agnes. “Are you awake?” she asks, expecting to start Agnes out of her reveries.

Unruffled and calm, Agnes turns and looks at Lena.

“Right,” Lena says. “I’ll park just outside. Get on the radio and find the one who’s in charge of the terminal’s security, what’s his name?”

“Circovic.”

“Tell him we’re here, and ask if there’s been any sign of John or Tom. Or anything else.”

“Sure.”

Lena continues up the ramp, then brakes hard to avoid colliding with a coach parked at an angle across the road.

“What the hell?” she says, staring at the standstill. Horns blare incessantly. She does not have to leave the car to know that something is wrong; the wide road is the arterial to the terminal. Stopping for longer than a minute means vicious parking tickets. Were it not for the weather, she would have driven around the mess.

She peers down the street. The blizzard turns everything more than fifty metres away into a grainy haze. Given the security checks, she was prepared for queues outside the terminal, but this is bizarre. The airport is a clockwork built to cope with hard wind, heavy snow and rotten weather in general.

This is no ordinary traffic jam.

“No sign of the suspects,” Agnes says and puts down the radio.

Lena shakes her head. “John’s here. This is his fault. No, I don’t know for sure, but I trust my gut feeling. Wherever he goes, chaos follows.”

“They’ve got the entrances tightly monitored.”

“Do you really believe that helps?” Lena asks.

She knows how this is planned: the police, the Piket and the task force will work alongside each other. The police and the airport security will try to locate John while the Piket remains outside, going in as soon as John has been spotted. The task force will deploy at a central location and rush in behind the Piket. Too many officers will raise concern and tip John off. If anyone asks, it is a drill.

Lena listens to the chatter over the radio and reads between the lines of taut exchanges between officers. Even the Piket are nervous. To an outsider, the huge number of officers involved would look ridiculous, but the rumour

of John’s actions has reached the farthest capillaries of the force. The term *rabid dog* is used more than once in the communications. Voices brim with adrenaline.

“To hell with it,” Lena mumbles and cuts the engine. Snapping commands over her radio, she orders the officers under her command to spread out in teams of two. When her instructions have been acknowledged, she steps out of the car.

As soon as she leaves the vehicle, the wind rams her and pushes her into the side window. The road is a horizontal tornado of furious travellers, motionless cars and whirling snow. She tries to slam the door shut, fails, leaves it open, and stalks towards the terminal.

Terminal five is a flat, rectangular building a few hundred metres long and with several wide entrances facing the street. She walks up to the nearest entrance and shows her card to the security staff and the police officer stationed at the doorway. The men are tense but professional; there is no such thing as lax airport security this side of the millennium. She hopes they have the wits to look out for Tom as well as John. Behind her are eight other police officers. The Piket team still wait in their van.

“Where’s Tom?” Lena asks.

“He hasn’t shown up,” the police officer says just as his radio beeps. “One moment,” he says and turns away.

“Great.” Lena runs her hand through her hair. “Absolutely wonderful. Just what we need. Agnes, we’ll do a sweep down the hall, starting at gate one. What?”

The police who spoke on his radio points to the street. “There’s been an incident at the taxi line.”

Lena’s skin grows cold. “What kind of incident?”

“A fight. And car thefts, I think.”

Lena catches her breath. Hell and absolute damnation. It is John. It must be.

But it makes no sense; he would not leave the airport without finding Tom. John would run if he had to, although only if he had good reason. The police’s presence would make him cautious, not scared. He would stay close to Tom.

The police officer’s choice of words sinks in: he said cars, not car.

Lena steps closer to the officer. “How many cars were stolen?” she asks.

“Two. One taxi, one private.”

The pieces fall into place. She is right. John is not running; he is still hunting Tom.

“I can’t fucking believe this,” Lena says. “What the hell is Tom doing outside the airport? Where did they go? What type of cars did they steal?”

“I’m not sure, but I can a–”

“Where’s the taxi line?”

The officer points. “At the other end of the terminal.”

Lena backs away. “I want to know what kind of cars they took,” she shouts. “The makes and colours. *Now.*”

She turns to the other officers who wait behind her. “Back to the cars. Agnes, make sure every single road from the airport is blocked. And tell the others to follow me.”

Lena runs to her car and fumbles with the keys. Agnes gets in the passenger seat just as Lena revs the engine and turns the siren back on.

“The helicopter too?” Agnes asks as she fastens her safety belt.

“All of them.” Lena wrestles the car into gear and rips past the other police cars.

John is not getting away. She will reel him in, whatever the cost.

*

Lena

Lena overtakes a truck, cuts across a junction, and swerves as her car loses traction. Wrenching the steering wheel to avoid sliding into the ditch, she floors the gas and drives onto a smaller road.

Leafless bushes scrape the sides of the car. On her right is a flight control tower, a pillar of black and white rising out of the white landscape. If she is right, the shortcut will take her to the road on which John and Tom drove away. A helicopter swoops over her car and turns in the direction of where she is heading.

“Can you see who that is?” Lena asks Agnes and points to the air. “I want to talk to them.”

Agnes leans forward and glances up. “It’s too small to be the task force. It must be one of ours.”

“Open a channel and put the radio on loudspeaker,” Lena says.

Agnes works the radio’s control panel, puts the radio between the car seats and pushes a button. “Calling helicopter Caesar twelve,” Agnes says.

A loud rasping noise is followed by a man’s voice. “Helicopter Caesar twelve here,” he shouts over the sound of the rotor blades. “Come in?”

“This is Detective Franke,” Lena says just as the car rattles over a metal grille. A yellow gate appears out of the blizzard. “Oh, for fuck’s sake – hold on, Agnes.”

Lena lowers her head and grits her teeth as the car smacks into the gate. A gunshot-like pang later, the car rushes on and leaves the shattered gate behind. Agnes’s side window is smashed into a matrix of fine lines where the gate struck the glass.

A small roundabout takes them on to the road that leads away from the terminal. The helicopter is a shadow above. Behind her, more police cars and the Piket van clear the roundabout. Sirens start up again. Blue flashing lights fill her rear-view mirrors like stroboscopes.

“Hello?” the radio sounds. “Are you there? Over.”

Lena breathes and shifts gears. “Tell me you know where the cars went,” she shouts.

“We’re looking for them right now. We received the descriptions a moment ago.”

“Screw the descriptions,” Lena snaps. “Look for two speeding cars. It’ll be them.”

Agnes taps on the control panel of the car’s communication unit. “They’ve blocked the road south,” she says to Lena. “The queues are going to build up fast.”

“Wait,” the man in the helicopter says.

“I can’t bloody wait,” Lena shouts.

“They’re just ahead. I almost missed them. They are not on the highway.”

Lena brakes hard, remembers the other cars behind her, and floors the gas pedal. Agnes holds on to her seat and looks at Lena in alarm.

“Where are they?” Lena asks. “I need directions, fast.”

“They’re on a road parallel to the highway. In the forest, on your right. I think they’re heading back to the airport.”

“Don’t let them out of your sight,” Lena says. “We’re going back to cut them off. Out.”

She slows down and looks for a good spot to turn around. Tom and John are returning back into the tightening net. For once, things are going her way.

“If you go back,” the man in the helicopter above says, “you’ll miss them.”

“You said they’re heading back?” Lena asks.

“Yes, but not to the terminal. The cars are driving towards a gate.”

“A gate to what?”

“The airfield.”

“Where’s the turn?” Lena asks.

“Just ahead of where you are.”

Lena sees the sign. Hoping the drivers behind her are paying attention, she slows down, turns right onto the narrow road, and stops. On their sides are sparse woods draped in a pale gloom by the blizzard.

“You drive,” Lena tells Agnes. “If they crash and run, I’ll go after them.”

Shielding her eyes, Lena leaves the car and runs around to the passenger door while Agnes scoots over to the driver’s seat. As soon as Lena is back

inside, Agnes accelerates hard, forcing Lena to cling to the door handle.

Lena peers into the distance and curses the weather. Were it not for the helicopter above, they would never have found the fleeing cars. At least she cannot be far behind them; Agnes, who usually makes a point of obeying every traffic law in existence, guns the car like a racing driver on a crusade. The other police cars are somewhere behind them, but Agnes has outrun them in seconds.

Lena's phone rings. An unknown number. Going this fast, she does not want to take her hands off the handle, but the call might be important. As quickly as she can, she accepts it and switches on the loudspeaker.

"Franke here – *Jesus*, mind that tree – who's this?"

"This is Jan Bjurman," a man says. "I'm head of security at Arlanda. I've been appointed crisis coordinator, but I'm not sure – are you in pursuit of the car thief?"

"We're heading towards the airfield just south of Arlanda," Lena shouts, holding on to her seat.

"I see," he says. "That's good."

"In what way?" Lena demands.

"The airfield is surrounded by a fence six metres high," he explains. "We've got patrols with IR sensors nearby, and the gates are reinforced. You need a code and swipe cards to get through."

"Is this road in use?" Lena asks, noting that there is less snow here than she expected.

"It's used by trucks and maintenance vehicles, so we keep it ploughed. It's also a dead end."

Lena holds on as the car drifts through a curve and accelerates again. Agnes leans forward and stares at the road as if challenging it to fight.

"I can't see the task force," Lena says. "Are they close?"

"They should be."

"Tell them to stay back.

"But my directives are – why?"

"John's got a fucking gun is why. He'll shoot at them."

"I don't have the authority to tell them what to do. But they know the suspect is armed."

Lena almost laughs. She considers telling him that the problem here is not the gun, but the man wielding it. "Try anyway," she says.

“I’ll talk to them. No promises.”

“And make sure no one is close.”

“The security on the other side has been told to give you room.”

“What about planes?”

“We have to let inbound flights land. They can’t circle in this storm. All outbound flights are grounded, but passengers are restless. People whisper about terrorists.”

“There,” Agnes says and points ahead.

Lena hangs up on the manager and squints into the whiteout. A few hundred metres ahead, red tail lights appear and vanish again, so quickly she almost thinks she imagines them. On cue, the radio beeps.

“Helicopter Caesar twelve here. You’re close to the cars.”

“Are we gaining on them?” Lena asks.

“Slowly. The leading car swerves a lot, but it’s going fast. It’s less than a kilometre to the gates.”

“How far apart are the cars?”

“It’s hard to tell. I’d say a hundred meters. Maybe less.”

Lena strains her eyes for another glimpse of the lights. A thousand metres left to the end. Scenarios flutter in her imagination as she tries to picture the closure: A dash through the snow, John giving up, a stand-off, or John committing suicide. A whirlwind whisking her away to a dull Kansas where she can sleep and toilets are not haunted.

The car rocks from side to side as the forest rushes past. In front of them, the lights creep closer and are soon in constant view. Two dual smears of red in the white. Reluctantly, she pulls her pistol, checks the clip, and puts the weapon back in its holster. Its grip is even colder than her hand.

“You’re closing the gap,” the man in the helicopter reports.

Lena wheezes as the car drifts sideways through another curve and rockets onto a straight stretch. They have to be near the gates.

“Damn it,” Agnes whispers.

“What?”

“They’re going faster.” Agnes flinches as they zip past a tree so close it touches the side of the car.

“You can still catch up with them, can’t you?” Lena asks. “The helicopter says we’re gaining.”

“That’s not the problem. The gates are just ahead.”

“The cars are right up at the gate,” the officer in the helicopter says. “Christ, they’re going really fast. I think the first car’s going to try to–”

“Hold on,” Agnes says and goes faster.

Lena and Agnes burn through the blizzard. The wind tries to shunt their vehicle into the forest, but to Lena’s amazement, Agnes keeps the car on the road. Metre after metre, they gain on John and Tom.

“I see the bastards,” Lena says. “You’re right. They aren’t slowing down.” She pauses. “He’s going to try to break through.”

The fence bleeds into view like a horizontal dark line beyond the cars. There is no way John or Tom can stop in time. Tom will crash, and John will not hesitate to run his car straight into Tom’s.

At the last moment, Tom’s car veers right and smashes into the fence next to the gate.

“Oh no,” Lena says. “No, no, *no*.”

Had Tom hit the gate, the thick metal bars would have reduced him to a sticky paste, but the fence is more brittle. Made to withstand frost and wire cutters, the mesh is tough enough to keep out animals and trespassers; however a car travelling at breakneck speed is a different matter.

For a moment, Lena thinks Tom has run clean through, but one of the car’s wheels stays tangled in the frayed metal strands and sends the car spinning. It turns violently, slams into a metal railing on the airfield, and stops.

Lena jumps in surprise as klaxons awake like a choir of banshees: Tom has set off the intruder alarm. Red warning lights flare up and cast the twisted fence in a fiery glow. The volume sends splinters through her head. It is the last thing she needs.

John brakes hard in front of the hole made by Tom’s car, and Agnes turns sharply to avoid colliding. Lena and Agnes’s car lurches into the forest, slides between trees and boulders, crosses a mound with a grating hiss, and comes to a spine-juddering halt less than thirty metres from John’s car.

“Mother of a–” Lena takes a deep breath and swallows hard. She cannot believe she is still alive.

Shaking herself into action, she flings her safety belt away and shoves her door open. John is on the far side; Lena and Agnes’s car will provide

cover if John shoots at them.

“Brief the coordinator,” Lena says and climbs out. “Make sure his people inside the fence pinch Tom.”

John’s car is next to the hole. She cannot see through its windows, but the doors look closed. John is inside. The helicopter climbs, seeking an altitude safe from gunfire. Snow cascades from trees from the noise and the wind. Competing with the klaxons are more sirens. The other police cars, closing in.

John cannot run or shoot them all. Whatever he chooses to do, his flight ends here.

*

Lena

Lena pulls her gun, points it at the ground, and looks over the car. At the shooting range, the weapon is usually a dead weight, but now it is a near-weightless trinket of metal and plastic.

She imagines the chain of reactions that will originate in her mind and end with bullets digging into another body. The trigger is a nerve, alert and ready, even keen. A shiver is enough. A sigh. An idea.

“Damn it,” Lena says and presses her fist to her temple. She must focus. This is the home stretch. She will keep together a little longer.

Agnes looks up from the radio inside the car. “Sorry?”

“Nothing.” Lena covers her eyes from the snow. “There’s no one moving in John’s car. I think he’s knocked out.”

“He’s still in the car,” Agnes says. “I see his shadow.”

“Really.” Lena squints and tilts her head. “I can’t see a thing.”

“He’s there,” Agnes says calmly. “Trust me.”

“I do,” Lena answers and pulls out a small megaphone from inside the car.

“John,” she calls, hoping her amplified voice will cut through the noise. “It’s over. You’re surrounded. Come out with your hands on your head.”

Lena has shouted the same words before, but the line has never felt so weak. The command is meant to be imposing, instilling a sense of inevitable defeat, and the police’s advantage in numbers is supposed to overwhelm the fugitive.

In John’s case, it is like pointing a gun at a wolf: The threat is real, but there will not be any recognition or fear. Not this time.

Agnes finishes briefing the coordinator, crawls over Lena’s seat, and climbs out. She looks at John’s car. “He’s not going to come.”

Lena cannot tell if Agnes means it as a question or a statement. “He’ll leave that car one way or the other,” Lena says. “But we have to talk him through this, or he’ll do something stupid.”

The sirens are closer. Out on the airfield, deep in the blizzard, are the orange and blue flashes of the airport security homing in on Tom. The

helicopter circles overhead. Farther away, the task force's helicopter is nearing; she can hear the rumble of its giant engine.

"You still want to help John," Agnes says softly. "After all he has done."

"I want to make sure no one gets hurt."

"John has already hurt many others."

"He's desperate," Lena says, trying to see the shadow Agnes claims is in the car.

"He could be a murderer," Agnes insists.

Lena looks at Agnes from the corner of her eyes. "So?"

"Yet you want to save him."

"What the hell, Agnes?" Lena turns and stares at her colleague. "Don't give me this devil's advocate bullshit. John is going to prison, but he's going there alive. Understood?" The past twenty-four hours have hardened Agnes so much Lena hardly recognizes her. John's broken mind seems to rub off on those close to him.

Agnes is silent. Her eyes are still on John's car. "He's leaving," she says.

"What?" Lena snaps her head back. She can barely make out the form of John's car, but there is no mistaking the shadow that emerges from a side door. She raises the megaphone.

"John, hold it," she calls. "Do not move."

The coordinator calls over the radio inside the car. "Franke, the suspect inside the airport is on the move."

Lena lunges into the car and snatches up the radio. "Repeat?"

"The other suspect is running. My team is in pursuit. Have you apprehended the other man?"

"No, he's–"

The shadow that left John's car slips through the fence and darts towards Tom's car. One moment John had been next to invisible, the next he is fading away in the storm again.

"John's inside the fence," Lena screams into the radio and runs towards John's car. "I repeat, John is on the airfield. He's armed. I'm following him."

"My team will–"

"Your team will stay the fuck back," Lena barks. "He will engage you. I have to talk to him." She reaches John's car and scrambles over the hood to get to the hole. Agnes is close behind her. The other police cars come into

view, engines roaring, lights blazing, sirens calling. John is a disappearing speck of grey. Tom is nowhere in sight.

“I have different orders,” the coordinator shouts back. “My team or the task force will seize him. You are to keep out of their way.”

“Says who?”

“Your commander.”

Lena edges through the hole in the fence and stumbles onto the airfield. “I can’t hear you,” she says. “Too much interference. Out.” She throws the radio away, shifts her gun to her right hand, and runs after John.

On her far right, the task force spill out of their helicopter and set off at a sprint, towards John. The airport security team have left their cars and follow the task force on foot. She has a head start, but only with seconds.

Her legs are on fire as she dashes across the tarmac. She is not a natural runner; the police force’s yearly tests always leave her nauseated, but she refuses to lose sight of John. Soon, she can see him a few steps behind the skidding and flailing shape of Tom.

Running on her right, Agnes veers away and dashes diagonally, picking up speed. Perhaps she plans to cut John and Tom off in case they change direction. Lena is too focused on breathing and staying on her feet to be concerned.

Behind Lena are the National Task Force, the other officers and the airport security team, all following her like a comet’s tail. Getting in the way of the task force can cost Lena her job, but their tactics will fail against John. Making someone give up takes fear, or at least some scrap of self-preservation.

John has neither. They cannot intimidate him or coax him into surrendering. When they surround John, he will do something unexpected, and mayhem will follow. Under his haggard appearance hides a callous machine. If he gets hold of one of the task force’s machine guns, no one in the airport is safe.

Some thirty metres ahead, John stops, fades and emerges again but smaller, his shape wrong. At first, Lena cannot make sense of what happened, but then she understands: John has caught up with Tom and brought him to the ground.

She closes on the men as they wrestle and strike each other with frenetic but feeble punches. The task force fans out and forms a semicircle around

the two men. The airport security team takes up positions behind them. Everyone is wary of John's supposed gun.

The police helicopter thunders overhead. John and Tom are a flurry of arms and legs. Shrill orders and counter-orders echo around the airfield. The task force edges closer, tightening their noose, and bark commands over raised sub-machine guns.

Tom screams in pain, and the task force stops, hovering between rushing in and looking for a clear shot. John is only a few seconds away.

Lena runs towards the two men and finds John sitting on Tom's chest. His hands are around Tom's throat. Tom claws at John's clothes, but his face is reddened and bulbous. He is burning through the last oxygen in his lungs. The fight is leaving him.

Both men's faces are smeared with blood. Neither of them looks at Lena. There are no guns or knives in sight. Only fists, panic and fury.

Without breaking pace, Lena goes from running to a sliding tackle and slams her right shoulder into John, shoving him off Tom. John lands on his back but springs back up, crouching like an animal. He looks at Lena, who lies sideways over Tom's twisting body. His eyes are lifeless and flat, and more chilling than anything Lena has ever seen.

She tries to stand back up, slips on the icy tarmac, and falls back onto Tom. When John tenses, Lena aims her pistol at his face.

"Don't," she says.

For the first time, Lena is so close to John she can reach out and touch him, but a deep instinct makes her want to recoil. While his expression is confused, his features are contorted and feral, lips peeled back and eyes wider than seems possible. Lena is an obstacle between a hunter and his kill. A barrier that must be breached.

Still, she is mesmerized, knowing she balances at a crossroads. One bad decision, a moment's hesitation, and John will die one way or another. Others are at risk: Agnes, Tom, the task force. The weight of lives hanging in the balance presses down on her as she gazes at John over her gun.

Tom touches his throat, makes a croaked sound, and tries to move away from underneath Lena. Keeping her eyes on John, Lena motions for Tom to keep still. She knows John is looking for an opening to rush past her or to snatch her weapon.

Tom lashes out and closes his hand around the barrel of Lena's gun.

“What the–” Lena tries to pull her weapon away from Tom’s hand, but he holds on.

“Give me,” Tom mutters. “I’ll kill him. I swear. Give it to me.”

“Let go, you idiot.” Lena stares at Tom in disbelief. “Have you lost your fucking mind?”

“*Give it to me*,” Tom screams.

John tenses again. Tom holds on. The task force’s commands are a deafening cacophony. Lena curses, rises to her knees, and throws herself down onto Tom’s face, putting all her weight behind her elbow as she rams it across his jaw. Tom’s head lolls sideways, and he lets go of Lena’s gun.

John moves.

Lena twists and aims, but John slaps the gun from her frozen hands and sends the weapon disappearing into the snow. She kicks John’s legs out from underneath him, but John pushes himself up and tackles Lena, driving her down into the snow. His face is stiff, his eyes blank and emotionless.

It is, she knows, the expression of a determined executioner.

*

John

John’s mind is blank as he falls. He hopes the fall will free him from the corrupted world he travelled, but he might be wrong. Perhaps he will find another lake or a new abyss. Maybe he faces an instant of blinding pain as his body breaks. If he dies, at least he will never see the creature who hunts him again. He counts his blessings.

The wind tears at his naked body as he rips through the sky. Incoherent words and fragments of sentences echo around him, fading in and out of his head like splinters of someone else’s dreams. There is no unison to the impressions other than a frenzied need, but under the shattered images is a sliver of barely restrained fury embedded in his mind like a nail.

He twists in the air to look down. The runways are still there, coming closer as he watches. Crossing one of them is a disorganized parade of uniformed people, running behind two single men right below him.

For a moment, John forgets his plunge: He recognizes the balding spot on his own head, the way he moves his arms when he runs. So far, he has faced his still-young high school sweetheart and a psychotic mimicry of Molly. Would he meet himself next?

But there is an aura of incompleteness around his body: The John below is a port waiting for its ship, a gaping hole that must be filled. A moment before John will hit the ground, his body tackles the other man to the ground.

There is a scream, a flash of steel, and a raised hand. The John on the ground looks up and searches the sky.

Falling down, John meets his own eyes and plummets through them.

*

John trembles at the centre of a chasm and swells like a river, exploding into the darkness and flooding every niche. Without

breaking pace, he wrests away control from a ghostlike presence, which slips away into a crevice in his mind too small for John to make out. That cannot be helped. At least it is gone.

After a long time, he opens his eyes.

He is on a field of snow. Frozen air washes over him. He is clothed, but his clothes are torn and stained. Countless cuts and bruises scream in chorus. Looking down, he finds himself sitting on top of a man he recognizes. His hands are around the man's throat. People move around him, half-hidden in the blizzard.

John does not know where he is, how he has arrived here, or who the people around him are, but he knows the man underneath him is responsible for Molly's death.

And he knows he is home.

*

Lena

Lena feels how John stops fighting and goes limp, the change as sudden as when he had attacked her. She rolls away and rises to a crouch. Her gun is gone. Around her, the task force closes in, edging nearer, tense and robot-like. They still think John is armed. The red dots of laser targeting aids dance on John and Lena's bodies.

"Stop," Lena shouts, then spits blood and coughs. Screaming feels like drinking acid. "Keep back."

The task force hesitates, and Lena turns back to John. "John Andersson," she rasps, "you're under arrest."

She takes a deep breath and recites the legal phrases, pausing to suck air in her lungs. As she speaks, she wonders if the words mean anything to someone so far beyond human behaviour.

John says nothing. He lies perfectly still, breathing heavily, sprawled on his back and staring at the sky. The wild look on his face is gone.

"Here I am," he mumbles. "At last."

Lena frowns. The sudden change in behaviour can be a deceit; she knows first-hand what he is capable of doing. Still, she cannot rule out shock or trauma.

"John," Lena says. "I got here in time. You didn't kill him. Don't screw this up now."

John does not answer. Behind Lena, Tom mumbles incoherently.

"Damn it, John," she says, louder. "No more bloody games."

He smiles and turns to look at Lena. "I'm John."

"I should bloody well hope so," Lena says. "Now move slowly. You've got everyone on edge. I'm trying to save you. You'll get help and whatever support you need."

Wheezing, John rises to his hands and knees. "I had support," he whispers. "I had Molly." His eyes move to Tom. "He took her."

"It wasn't this man," Lena says, holding up her hands. If John lost his temper again, he was finished.

John shakes his head. "He helped."

Lena grasps for words that will soothe John. “Perhaps,” she says, “but he’s going to prison for a long time. We got enough on him. I promise.”

John looks at Tom. “Prison isn’t enough.”

“He’s not the murderer. You’ve done enough.”

“You’ve no idea what I’ve done.”

“Torture.” Lena stabs her finger at John. “Armed assault. Theft. Break and enter.” She stops when John’s eyes grow wide.

John’s voice is weak. “Torture?”

“You’re telling me you don’t remember.”

“I would never torture anyone.”

The task force moves closer, but Lena holds them back with a warning hand. She wonders why they obey; perhaps they think she and John are in a stand-off.

“I don’t buy it,” Lena says. “You tried to kill Tom a minute ago.”

“I did.” John looks at Tom and nods slowly.

“You don’t want that,” Lena says, emphasizing every word. “I’ve been where you are. I know what’s happening to you. It’d destroy you.”

“You really don’t know what’s – wait.” John points behind Lena.

Lena begins to turn when a shove in her back throws her forward and down onto her stomach, next to John’s feet. Someone kicks her hard in her side, but she cannot see who it is. John scrambles backwards over the snow.

Another kick cracks one of her ribs. The impact rolls her over on her back and lets her see her attacker: Standing next to her, Tom is pulling his foot back to hit her again. His savaged face is distorted into the visage of a demon.

“Cunts,” Tom rasps. “You thought you’d take me, did you? I’ll teach you,” he growls and kicks her again.

Lena turns on her side, bringing her fists up to protect herself. Her body screams with pain. Tom’s shoe connects with her right arm, and she cries out as red lightning crackles in her mind. The task force shift their laser sights onto Tom, but Tom either ignores them or does not notice. Some of the dots dance on Lena. She knows that the task force wants to rush in, but the snowfall blocks their view; she can hear calls for them not to shoot.

She can barely move her arms as Tom pulls his foot back for another kick. If he hits her head or her side again, she might faint. If she passes out, Tom will turn on John sitting hapless and open-mouthed a few steps away.

Someone will be shot. Hopefully Tom, but maybe John. That cannot happen.

When Tom kicks again, Lena sacrifices her guard and reaches for Tom's legs. The kick slams into Lena's thigh, but she shuts out the pain, grabs one leg of Tom's trousers, and pulls down. Tom sways and tries to regain his balance. She pulls again, and Tom crashes down on top of her, cursing and screaming.

For a moment, her vision blackens when the last air is forced from her lungs. She had hoped to bring him down on the ground next to her; instead Tom holds her down, spins on his side, and straddles her, oblivious to the clusters of glowing red points on his body. Looking down at her, Tom balls his fist and lands a glancing blow on her temple.

Lena screams and bucks to get Tom off her, but he weighs too much. When he leans back, she almost catches his head with a wild kick, but he ducks and drives his fist hard into her chest.

The punch sends splinters of raw hurt throughout her body. For a moment, she drifts off, sinking into a dark quietness. Then, just as quickly, rage pulls her back, and she resurfaces to see him leering down at her.

Meat, she thinks, or hears herself think. *Grinning, useless flesh.*

The words creep into view, slipping into her consciousness like stage whispers by an unseen entity.

Source of pain.

Filthy animal.

Unworthy to breathe.

Unfit to be.

I will shut you down.

The swarm of red shimmering dots crosses Tom's face, and he pauses with his fist in the air. He looks up at the officers and troops around him as if seeing them for the first time. His furious expression changes into resigned surprise, and he sags.

"Fuck it," he wheezes. "You win." He raises his voice. "Don't shoot."

The task force shouts at him to put his hands on his head and stand up. Tom obliges and shifts his legs to rise up.

"I got it," Tom calls. "All right? I'm doing it."

When Tom moves, Lena's right hand touches cold metal buried in the snow. Her gun. She closes her hand around the grip, whisks up the weapon,

and trains it on Tom's face.

Tom stares down at Lena in incomprehension. "I said I give up," he shouts. "Put your fucking gun down, will you?"

Lena's vision narrows down to Tom's face. One small movement is all it takes to send a message straight into his lies. When Tom does not move, Lena smiles and tightens her finger around the trigger.

A shot rings, sharp and loud, and Tom's throat explodes in a red cloud.

For an endless second, Tom remains sitting up, then slumps forward over Lena. He convulses once and grows still, his forehead resting on Lena's shoulder.

After another long moment, the task force closes in.

Lena pushes Tom's body off her and rolls away, leaving Tom sprawled on his chest, arms wide. His ruined chin is raised, as if waiting for a wind to lift him. Agitated voices call for ambulances and hands prod at her, but she is too numb to respond. The world, so capricious a moment ago, has solidified into cold air and distant voices.

She looks towards the shapes in the blizzard and sees Agnes, her gun raised. Her face is pale but serene.

Agnes?

Lena tries to curse, but blood trickles into her mouth and turns the profanity into a gurgle. She had wanted to shoot Tom. As she aimed, she pictured the wound erupting in his face. She transformed a human being into a stain that needed to be erased, just as she had done on that wretched raid so many years ago.

She had thought herself in control and chased John until the rope's end to stop him from becoming a monster, only to once again lose control to the demon she already had become. The door had been open, and she had nearly fallen through.

But she had also glimpsed the beast that hid inside. It had come close to possessing her, however now she understood its form, how it moved behind her frenzy. She sensed the subtle shift in her temper that had unlocked the gates of her mind and let the monster in.

The temptation to hurt lingers, and with it a voice. *Rid the world of them all*, it murmurs. *Carve them out, pick them off, shed them like used skin. Let them suffer, teach them pain. Bare your heart, and show them no mercy.*

Then, reluctantly, the voice fades.

The wind around her is liquid ice. Her veins are tapped of blood and filled with soreness. All sounds blur to a dull hum. Around her, shapes move in, lift her up, and carry her away. Looking up at the blizzard, she wonders about the voice she heard, and if she ever would hear it again. If she does, she has her answer ready.

Never, she would say. *I have seen you. I know your voice. Next time, I will see you coming.*

And I will slam the door in your face.

*

Lena

The bastion of mortar and arched windows that is Lindhaga Hospital is hidden away in a hilly, forest-clad area an hour's drive from Stockholm.

Twenty-six years ago, the building was converted from private rehabilitation centre into a joint centre run by the government's correctional department and a university psychology faculty. Bars, pool tables and gyms were quietly replaced by a small number of Sweden's most difficult criminals. The staff is trained and numerous. No one has escaped.

From a distance, the hospital looks to Lena like a nineteenth-century mansion overlooking a tranquil archipelago. Its proud front faces the sea and a scattering of small distant islands, while open grassy fields stretch away from the building's sides and rear. Beyond the fields are dense and deep spruce forests where the gloom hangs heavy even in daylight.

The hospital's sole sign is mounted next to the only gate in the brick wall that encircles the building. There are no signposts at the nearby highway; if you cannot find the hospital, you have no business there.

She leaves her car on the half-empty parking lot and walks up to the gate, treading carefully on the packed snow so as not to slip; sudden moves hurt her ribs, as does laughing, or being awake. The cold stings her bruised cheeks, but at least the wind is calm, barely disturbing the snowflakes that fall around her.

The sun attempts to break through the overcast morning sky and leaves spokes of light across the frozen water. Muffled classical music sounds from inside the house. Apart from the single barbed wire on top of the wall, the place looks inconspicuous, but she knows that motion detectors and cameras hide along the hospital's perimeter.

Lena presses the button on the intercom and waits. After a moment, a woman's voice asks for Lena's name.

"Lena Franke, Stockholm Police Force. I have an appointment with John Andersson."

The gates open, and Lena crosses the yard to the warmth of the small reception. Five minutes later, she has completed the paperwork and is

introduced to a calm, smiling man carrying a key ring and a large baton.

The man escorts her to a cell halfway down a green corridor lit by a soft homely light. Paintings and bookshelves adorn the walls, metre-high flowers struggle in the poor light, the carpets are perfectly aligned. Thick iron rods bar all windows in the corridor.

She looks through the reinforced glass and sees John sitting on his bed, gazing out through a window at the sea. Three weeks have passed since John was ushered away from Arlanda. Reports said he had been compliant and cooperative, showing no aggression or violent tendencies. Two cuffs around his ankles secure him to a pair of metal hoops in the floor. There are no books, flowers, cutlery or pens. Utterly still, he looks like a statue lost in reveries.

Having watched John's manoeuvring and actions up close, she cares little for professional opinions. Her gun is left behind in her car. She would not bring the weapon inside the cell even if doing so was allowed.

Ever since John's sudden transformation from unfeeling executioner into confused and passive amnesic, she wants to believe he is changed, and she knows how much she wants to believe it. His obedience can be a thin disguise stretched over a murderous devil. She cannot trust him. Not yet.

"I'll have to accompany you," the nurse says in a hushed voice. "You understand."

Lena nods. He unlocks the door, and they step into the room. John does not turn to face them.

"John?" Lena asks. No reaction. "John?"

John turns away from the window and looks at Lena. Recognition flashes over his face. "You," he says. "Hello."

"I'm Lena Franke. Do you remember me?"

He nods. "I'm not likely to forget you in a hurry."

"Just making sure. They say you actually lost your memory." That is still hard to believe, but she wants to keep all options open.

"I did," John says. "It came back. Most of it."

Behind Lena, the nurse closes and locks the door. The wires from John's manacles rustle softly as he shifts on the bed. Lena sits down on a chair on the other side of the room and puts her bag on the floor.

In the first hospital reports, John claimed to know nothing about what had happened during the two frenzied days the police searched for him.

Later reports detailed how he had broken down into hysterics when he was confronted with what he had done. Gradually, his memories had returned, bringing more trauma. Or so the psychologists say. Lena is unconvinced.

John smiles at her, but he looks hollowed out, a fragile shell of a man who had lost much and done things both unforgettable and unforgivable. If he puts on a show, he does it well.

“So you recall what happened?” Lena says.

“I’m afraid so.” John grimaces, looks down at his bed and out through the window. “I feel so sorry for him.”

“Niklas?”

John shakes his head. “Nils. My job mate. He must’ve been terrified. I can never make up for it.” He pauses. “I feel sorry for that policeman too.”

“Who?”

“The one I shot outside Tom’s office. I heard. Did they save his finger?”

“No,” Lena says. “But he’s alive. What about the murderer?”

John turns back to look at Lena. She meets his eyes and looks for a glimmer of the hell-bent avenger, but she sees only a tired man.

“What about him?” John asks.

“Do you feel any remorse?”

John sighs. “Should I have killed him? No. Does he deserve to live? I think I’ll let you answer that one.”

“Seen enough violence, have you?”

“I’ve seen enough of many things.”

Lena brushes a speck of dust from her trousers. “For the record, I still don’t buy your story. I would like to, but I can’t. A blackout all the way up until your arrest? It’s just too convenient.”

John smiles at the floor. “Things were black, all right.”

“Not a single memory of what went down, you said in the report. Come on. You can do better than that.”

“You think I’m lying.” John glances up at Lena.

“I’m naturally suspicious. It goes with the job.”

“I don’t blame you. Some of the doctors think I’m covering up. They work hard to keep a straight face.” John chuckles. “I can hardly believe it myself.”

“But you’re sticking to your story?”

“I’m being as honest as I can be.”

“Work with me,” Lena urges. “If you don’t remember anything, that means you were out for over a day. Didn’t you sleep?” She knows she is pushing John, but she wants a sign that he is truly recovering.

“Once.”

“Did you dream?”

“In a way.” John runs his hand across his face. “But nothing I will relay to the doctors.”

“Are you laughing?”

“Sorry,” John says. “I’m tired. But I’m glad you came. I wanted to thank you.”

“I didn’t bring any flowers.”

“I mean for saving me. I would have killed Tom. I came very, very close.”

“You do know that Tom is dead, don’t you?”

“Yes, but not because of me,” John says. “And I caused enough pain as it is. I’ll be here for a long time. But perhaps they’ll let me out one day, and if they do, it’ll be because of you.”

Lena bites her lip while they share a long silence. Their eyes do not meet, but the pause is not uncomfortable.

“What happened?” John asks.

Lena looks up. “I know they’ve already told you everything. They wanted to jog your memory.”

“Before that,” John says. “What happened to Molly? I saw–” John’s hands grip the bed sheets hard. “I know she was shot, but I don’t know why.”

Lena scratches her neck, looks down, and sighs. She does not need this. Counsellors and psychotherapists can wrap the horror in gentle words and deal with the responses. In her mouth, the words have edges.

“Please?” John urges.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.” He closes his eyes and leans back into his pillow. “I need to know.”

Lena gives John a summary of what she knows: In the wake of the hunt, the police pieced together a picture of the failed robbery with help from Mick following his surgery. He has lost sight in one eye and will slur for the

rest of his life, but when he grew lucid, he was happy to talk. He would do anything to stay in the hospital and away from John.

Niklas is also alive, but only with the aid of an array of machines. The doctors give him a one-in-ten chance, and if he makes it, he will be bed-bound for the rest of his miserable life.

When Lena finishes, John is crying.

"I warned you – oh, damn it." Lena rises and takes her jacket off the chair. "I'm sorry. I'll leave."

"No," John says. "Stay. Please."

Lena pauses in mid-rise and sits down again. "Sure." She waits while John takes a shuddering breath and wipes his nose.

"It was about money, then," John asks. "Nothing worse?"

"Just money. It was quick." The words make her cringe, but if she were in John's shoes, they are what she would want to hear.

Minutes pass while John regains his composure. "Thank you," he says hoarsely. "Again."

"Anything else I can do, let me know."

"What happened to you?" John asks.

"Incredibly, I still got my job. I got a warning, but my boss was backed up by a profiler who said I'd been right all along. She said I 'acted inexpertly but possibly prevented the loss of further lives', end quote."

"What does that mean?" John asks.

"It's a fancy way of saying I screwed up, but possibly saved people from getting shot. I reckon my boss still had to pull a few strings to keep me on the force."

Or, Lena suspects, Gren had pulled a great thick bundle of ropes. There are several reasons why she should have been kicked out, but Gren, after an endless briefing with Agnes, had put his own job on the line to save Lena's.

Lena had tried to coax Gren into telling her what he and Agnes had discussed, but so far, Gren had been quiet. One day, she would walk through fire to find out what they had said about her.

"And my colleague backed me up, too," Lena adds.

"Agnes?"

"How do you know her name?"

"One of the doctors let it slip. She was the one who shot Tom, right?"

"I can't tell you that."

“Of course.” John smiles. “I’d like to thank her too. For saving you.”

Lena hesitates. “What did you see of what happened?” she asks.

“It looked as if Tom tried to kill you. That is why she – ah, why Tom was shot, right?”

“Correct.”

According to Agnes’s statement, Tom had reached for his inner pocket. Agnes had thought he was reaching for a concealed weapon, and, being closer than the task force and having a clear shot, she had fired.

But Tom had given up. There had been no concealed weapon, no threat, and no danger. Instead, Lena had succumbed to that gleeful, homicidal persona that hid in her head, and she would have shot Tom if Agnes had not beaten her to the task. It is possible that Agnes could have misread Tom’s moves, but it was unlikely.

“Can I send her message?” John asks.

Lena shakes her head. “Agnes is gone.” In the tumult that followed, she had lost sight of Agnes, and she had not managed to contact her since.

“Oh,” John says. “Did she quit?”

“I have no idea. Apparently, she filed the necessary reports, left for home, and vanished. Everyone’s as baffled as I am.”

Lena is sharing what might be officially classified information with John, but she could not care less: A bond between them had been created when their paths had crossed. It is a connection she cannot and will not attempt to explain to anyone else.

Should the beast inside him gain the upper hand, he might turn on her, but she knows he is struggling not to let that happen. He wants to be in control. And in that constant fight, they are united.

“That’s unfortunate,” John says.

Lena nods. “You can say that again. I haven’t even had a chance to talk to her since Tom was shot.”

Lena had still been at the hospital ward when Agnes had strolled out of the office and disappeared into a clear winter’s morning. Clean desk, sorted files, no calls. Gun and ID card in a drawer, the rest of her equipment in her open locker. When the police finally broke into her spotless flat, the fridge was clean and switched off, the bed made, all sinks dry. Phone and credit card tracing showed nothing.

The next day, Agnes's landlord called in and said someone had dropped the keys into his mailbox during the night, along with the remaining rent and a cancellation of the tenancy. The day after that, Agnes's signed resignation form arrived at the police personnel office.

Officially, the search is still on, but Gren and his superior commanders made an official statement: Pressure had gotten the best of Agnes, and she had probably gone to ground. Most likely, she was staying with a relative or a friend. They dropped the search. There are juridical matters to iron out, but tracking her takes too much resources.

Lena has not told anyone of the Post-it note Agnes had slipped into Lena's calendar while Lena still was at the hospital. Revealing the existence of the message would be wrong; the message was for Lena alone, and the four words were as cryptic as the woman who had penned them:

Don't worry.

Yours,
Agnes.

Since finding the note, Lena has fallen asleep staring at it every night, always failing to make sense of its meaning. One day, she will find Agnes and ask her. Or Agnes would find her.

The nurse clears his throat. "It's time," he says quietly.

Lena nods. "I've got to go." She wants to tell John to get better, but she cannot find the right way to phrase the words.

"Do you think I'll ever get out?" John asks. "That things will go back to normal?"

Lena sighs, raises her hand, and lets it fall. "You're asking the wrong person," she says. "I'm not a counsellor."

"I'm sorry."

Lena pauses and shrugs. "I don't think what happened out there," she says and nods at the window, "was the real you. There are bad sides to all things. Even people. You'll just have to convince them you're yourself again."

"I'll try."

“You’ll have to convince me too,” Lena adds. “Chasing you was hell. Keep together, and hope for the best.”

A small smile flashes across John’s face at Lena’s words. “I have hope,” he says. “That much I know.”

“Good. You take care now.” Lena returns his smile and leaves the room.

When she exits the hospital, the bird she saw outside John’s window is flying above the building, gliding on the still air in a perfect circle. Beside it flies another bird, smaller and fairer, keeping close as if pleased to have found a comrade in the sky.

She watches the birds until the cold forces her to get inside her car and turn on the heat. A minute later, she leaves the parking lot and slowly makes her way back to the larger road. Her desk waits. Tasks are filling up her agenda. Traces are being left and injustices committed. She will deal with them one at a time.

Just like the demons shackled in her mind.

*

John

John watches from his window as Lena's car leaves the parking lot. When the vehicle has melded with the grey of the woods, he lies back on his bed and exhales.

A strange woman. Part granite wall, part strangely long-lost friend. She was holding back, and yet she craved to talk. He hopes she will come back. She probably would. If only he could confide in her and explain the sights he has seen.

But that will not happen. His story is one that never can be retold. Any listener would think he had gone mad again. He knows his vivid experiences define him, but they themselves were indefinable. And while he has returned to the world he knows, part of his dream has escaped too. That would be a sure sign of lunacy to anyone but him.

So he will be silent. Mundane, submissive and courteous. He wants out, back to life beyond these walls. Failing now is not an option; he has made it back home, into a world he recognizes, and here he will stay.

Reaching out, he switches off the light and watches the shadows creep out from the corners. In his room it is always half-dusk. He studies the ceiling while he listens to the wind brushing against the window. People pass in the hallway outside his room. Cars come and go. The classical music echoes in the distance.

A bird flutters close to the windowpane, and John laughs quietly. He feels the presence like the touch of a feather against his thoughts.

"Are you there?" he asks.

"Until the end," Miriam whispers.

"What do you make of her?"

"The Detective? Very chirpy woman, I have to say. She probably eats sanding papers for breakfast."

John nods. "She's rough around the edges," he says, "but I like her."

"She is also damned moody, if I may say so. Why are you smiling?"

"Because she thinks I might leave this place one day."

"You will. I'll show you how."

“Thank you. Miriam?”
“Yes?”
“Please don’t ever leave.”
There is a short silence, filled with the sense of a smile.
“I’m always here,” she says. “Just come looking.”

*

THE END

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Cheers,
Erik Boman

Acknowledgements

This story sprang from several ideas that orbited me for some time before they, as ideas do, decided to dance, collide, and bounce off in new and unexpected directions.

All locations in Stockholm are real. As for Hell, impressions may vary.

Thank you

Tove Jorgensen: explorer in arms, charter of stars, midnight muse.

Also

Class of ‘11, who taught me not to pull any punches

Marti Leimbach, who told me to run with this story

Pauline Nolet, proofreader extraordinaire

All members of XP regn (past, present and future), for evenings and nights spent elsewhere